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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
WHAT'S NEXT FOR SHENMUE?
Yu Suzuki reveals his biggest update yet
CALL OF DUTY®
WWII
EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO SLEDGEHAMMER AND THE GAME THAT COULD CHANGE COD FOREVER
Future
ISSUE 192



We're fast approaching our 15th birthday as a magazine, if you can imagine that, and as such I've spent a lot of time thinking about the gaming franchises that have helped to shape those years of the industry. A handful rise to the top as particularly significant; Grand Theft Auto titles, *World Of Warcraf*t, and the series that the game on our cover derives from, Call Of Duty.

Activision's shooter franchise has dominated the industry for over a decade, rising in prominence with the release of *Call Of Duty 2* at the beginning of the last generation and becoming part of the fabric of our lives, an essential annual purchase, from *Modern Warfare* onwards. Buying the new COD, and being there day one to join the online campaigns with your friends, has become as essential to many of us as having a copy of FIFA.

And FIFA is an interesting comparison given that it shares a common complaint with COD that all you really get each year is a new set of kits for the players. It's a harsh and I would suggest unfair remark, but I can understand its origin. Such a complaint can certainly not be levelled at *Call Of Duty: WWII*. This is something entirely new while harking back to something terribly familiar. It was fascinating to find out how Sledgehammer started this journey and where it believes it's likely to end up.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

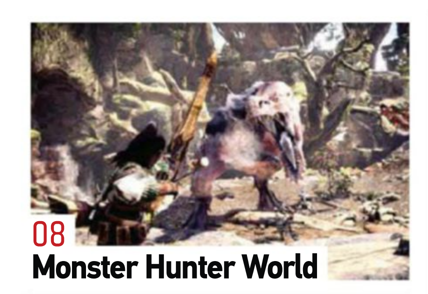



SCORE
250


HIGHSCORE
1,000
OFF
100% COMBO
3

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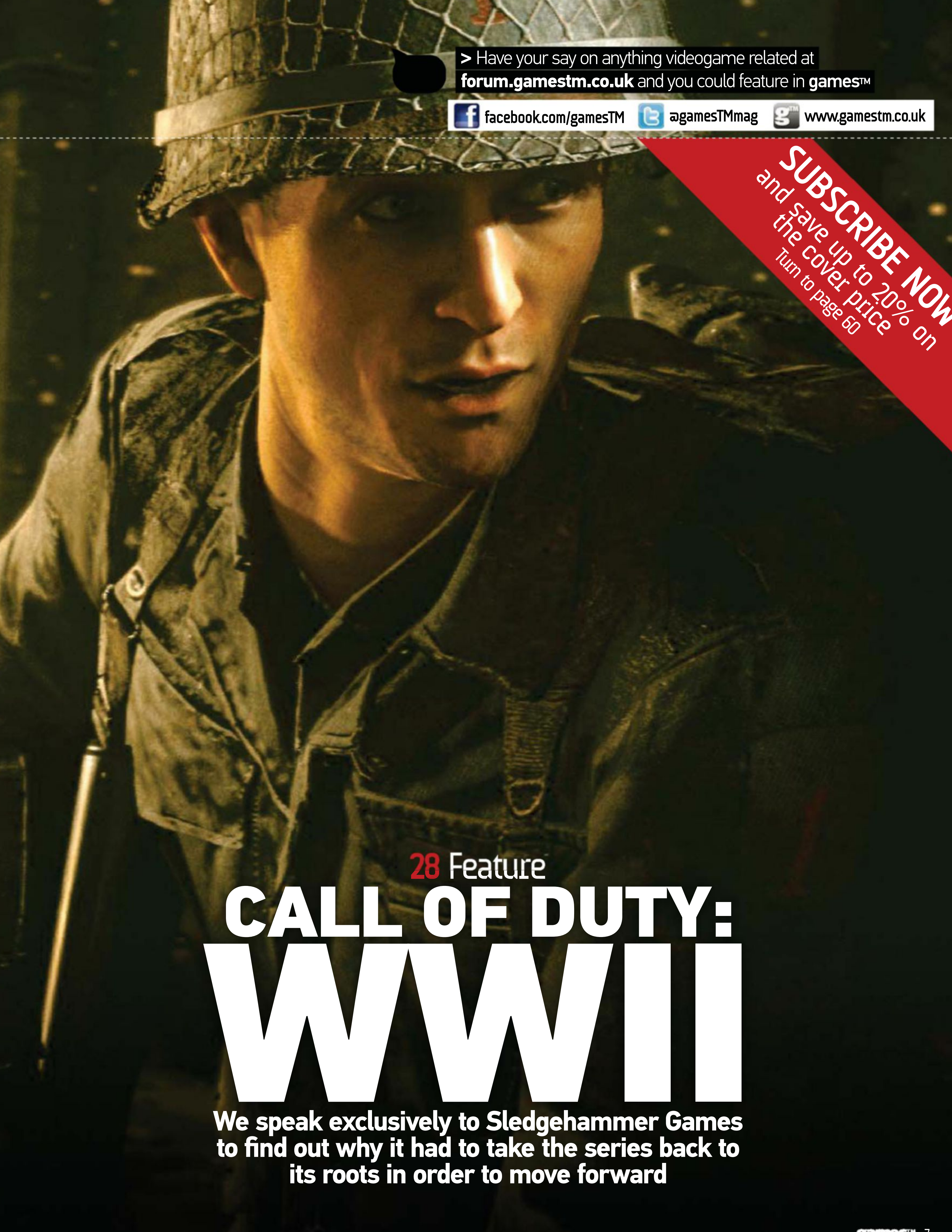
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CALL OF DUTY: WWII

We speak exclusively to Sledgehammer Games to find out why it had to take the series back to its roots in order to move forward



MONSTER HUNTER WORLD AIMS TO SLAY ITS BIGGEST EVER AUDIENCE

➔ WE GO HANDS-ON TO HUNT DOWN TWO EPIC BEASTS AND FIND OUT WHAT CAPCOM HAS IN STORE

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1-4**

The most spectacular moment during our hands-on time with *Monster Hunter World* – the moment that perhaps best encapsulates what Capcom is trying to achieve with the latest entry in the cult gaming series – occurred at the climax of our pursuit of a limping Anjanath as it headed towards the crest of a steep hill.

We first discovered the T-Rex-like beast that was the target of our hunt lurking in a cave. We were led there via a new mechanic introduced to get rid of the aimless wondering that you'd have to partake in to find your prey in previous Monster Hunters. You're accompanied by a swarm of glowing green Scout Flies that lead you to points of interest to help you track your target – a footprint, perhaps, or a glob of slime plastered on a tree trunk. Interacting with these clues will fill a bar that indicates how close you are to getting the monster's scent. Once the Scout Flies have it, they'll lead you directly to the beast you're seeking.

The cave that we found the Anjanath in wasn't the ideal place to do battle. We lured it out into the open to give us the space we needed to avoid its vicious attacks. We took the cowardly approach of attacking the creature's legs, staying well away from the snapping jaws and whipping tail – which as Monster Hunter veterans will know, often yields a special bit of bounty if you focus on attacking it – at either end. The battle raged for some time. We leapt off some high ground to mount the beast, repeatedly plunging our duel blades into its flesh, when we weren't hanging on as the Anjanath thrashed about in its attempts to dislodge us from its back. The Anjanath took its shots too. Crests occasionally flare up on its head and back, a sure sign that its pissed and that you should prepare for a new arsenal of attacks, including fire breath. We had thought we would be the ones doing the barbecuing when we returned home victorious after slaying our quarry, but here we were desperately rolling around to put out the flames singeing our poor hunter. We put some space between us and our foe to glug down a health potion, and then got stuck back in.

Eventually, the Anjanath had had enough. It limped off in retreat: the tell-tale sign that a fight is coming to an end in a series that doesn't have health bars to tell you how weak your enemy is. And here we are. Back at the crest of that hill. When the Anjanath reached the crest, the beating wings of Monster Hunter's most iconic creature, the Rathalos, came into view. Its talons were bared and it was ready to fight. It was like something from a monster movie, Godzilla and Mothra doing battle for the benefit of their audience – and rest assured we stayed well away. Anjanath got a taste of its own medicine as Rathlos bathed it in its fiery breath, before the winged monstrosity sunk its talons into the scaly hide of Anajanath, lifted it from the ground, then dropped it into a huge ravine beside the hill. We took our chance, leaped down into the ravine after it and delivered a final blow to the Anjanath to finish the hunt.



That spectacular clash between the Anjanath and the Rathalos felt like it had been set up for our benefit. We're still not sure it wasn't, given that it bears a striking similarity to a scene we saw in the game's initial reveal, but Capcom assured us that the encounter was not scripted. They say that the "World" in *Monster Hunter World* is meant to signal the fact they want the environment to be a significant »

factor in this game, and that includes creating the sense that it is a living, breathing ecosystem. While it was possible for monsters to come into contact in previous games, it will be far more common in *World*, with more creatures roaming the environment to create the possibility for encounters like the one we experienced. Additionally, monsters will no longer just focus on you, but will actively battle each other. If that means more cool emergent moments like the one we witnessed, we're all for it.

THE WORLD IS YOUR WEAPON

There are other ways your environment and the creatures within it can come into play, too. On another hunt we undertook, the Great Jagras we had been battling retreated into a cave to try and catch some shut eye and heal up. After smashing it in the face with our hammer to indicate that it wasn't sleepy time, we took a swipe at one of the fireflies floating around in the cave. This unleashed a flash of light that temporarily stunned the Jagras, allowing us to get a few valuable hits in without retaliation. Other examples of new environmental factors that we haven't yet experienced first-hand are the nests and tree branches that you can try to lure monsters into to get them trapped, or more spectacularly, dams that can be burst to send a torrent of water onto whichever unfortunate creature happens to be in its path.

"ANJANATH GOT A TASTE OF ITS OWN MEDICINE AS RATHLOS BATHED IT IN ITS FIERY BREATH"

The World in *Monster Hunter World* is also meant to gesture towards the fact that the zones that were separated by loading screens in previous entries are now part of one seamless open-world. That focus on the World suffix has resulted in the creation of a far more attractive place as well. We're not going to claim it looks like *Horizon Zero Dawn*, but stepping out onto lush green plains, a rich blue sky overhead, to see wildlife big and small roaming a landscape that feels alive and ripe for exploration, gives you the feeling that this is a place you want to spend your time hunting, foraging, and playing in with friends via four-player online co-op.

There's another reason for the World moniker. Capcom sees this as an opportunity to get new players on board, which makes sense given that the series is returning to PlayStation for the first time in years and that this is the first mainline entry to appear on an Xbox platform. Capcom hasn't called it *Monster Hunter 5* because it thinks the number might put people off who haven't played any of the previous four. Capcom does insist, however, that this is still a mainline title and that while they think the new name will entice new players in, that doesn't mean they are dumbing down or jettisoning the things that Monster Hunter fans love.

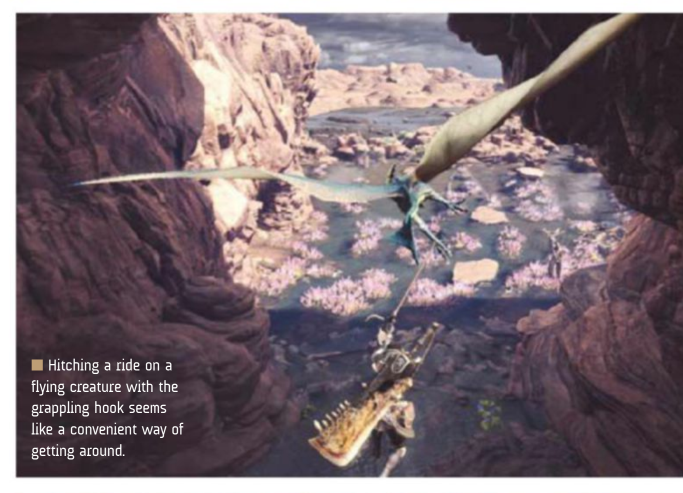
You can understand why people might have through *Monster Hunter World* was heading in that direction. Its debut trailer seemed very action focused, in part thanks to the introduction of a grappling hook that you can use to swing quickly from one place to another, or even to grapple onto the monster you're facing. Having played the game, though, we don't think that stripping out complexity to focus on action is what is happening at all. Yes, there is the introduction of the Scout Flies to make finding the monster your hunting less of a random exercise, but that was always a chore anyway, so we're all for a new tracking system to smooth out the process of finding your target.

And for all that's new in *Monster Hunter World*, it's by no means jettisoned the core aspects of the series' design. All 14 weapon classes are still in the game – axes, swords, hammers, and so on – and along with them the playstyles that each of those weapon classes supports. Most importantly, the core Monster Hunter loop of preparing for a hunt, doing the hunt, and then returning to upgrade your equipment in preparation to take on tougher challenges is still very much intact. Before we headed out on our first hunt for the Great Jagras, we stepped into our tent at a base camp, selected our weapon, changed our armour, and equipped a charm to boost our abilities. We then sat ourselves down at a table behind the tent to treat ourselves to a hearty meal to boost our attack and defence. Once we'd completed the hunt, we stepped back into the tent to craft ourselves a set of fancy new Jagras armour with the parts we'd harvested, making us more durable for the next hunt – we should mention that it would normally take multiple hunts to get all the parts you need to craft a whole set of armour, as in previous games. This process was simply shortened for the purposes of the demo. In other words, it still feels like Monster Hunter to us.

It's difficult to be all things to all people. Can *Monster Hunter World* please its hardcore fanbase and tempt a whole new audience to jump in at the same time? We don't know, but what we've played so far leaves us optimistic about the direction they're heading. We're looking forward to our next hunt.







Hitching a ride on a flying creature with the grappling hook seems like a convenient way of getting around.



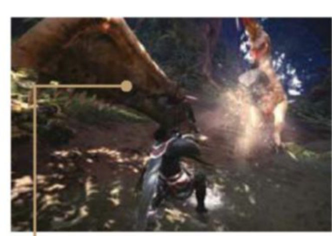




Above: Taking down beasts like this Anjanath is always going to be more fun with friends at your side. Left: Leading you to footprints and other such signs to help you track monsters, Scout Flies make it a lot easier to find your prey than it has been in the past.

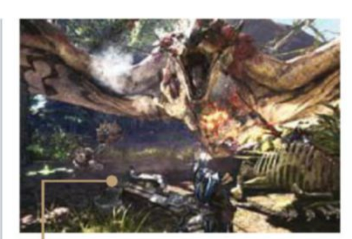
CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON

→ We give you the lowdown on four of Monster Hunter's distinct weapon classes



1 GREAT SWORD

As you can guess by looking at it, the size of this sword doesn't lend itself to swift strikes. It does dish out heavy damage with its huge arcing blows, however. Charged strikes are particularly devastating.



2 SWITCH AXE

The Switch Axe is effectively two weapons in one. You can use it as a long-range axe, or transform it into a sword mode, which allows you to perform swift sword strikes, again at a relatively long range.



3 LIGHT BOWGUN

This is a ranged weapon. In contrast to its heftier cousin, the Heavy Bowgun, you can still move quickly with this weapon in your hands. It privileges this swift movement and rapid firing over damage.



4 INSECT GLAIVE

The thing that's allowing that hunter to get high above the monster is the Insect Glaive, a weapon you can pivot off to launch aerial attacks. You can also fire off a Kinsect to get extracts from monsters that boost your abilities.

THE GREAT INDEPENDENT INVASION OF THE SWITCH

→ NINTENDO BOLSTERS ITS LINE-UP INTO 2018

Things just got real for Nintendo. The Switch has been going from strength to strength since its launch earlier this year, but there's been a lingering sense of unease when looking at its line-up. The first-party IP releases have been, unsurprisingly, fantastic, but there's still a rather large gap to fill. Third-party publishers have been slow to adopt the console, while the lack of independent studios pledging commitment had left us wondering whether Nintendo was still yet to update its archaic approach to courting and supporting Indies. Lord are we happy to be wrong on that one.

"We love the creativity, passion and amazing response that our independent developer community has already shown for Nintendo Switch," said Damon Baker, Nintendo of America's Senior Manager for Publisher & Developer Relations. "It's great to see so many different developers creating new, unique experiences that take advantage of the hardware's features. This is a win for fans, who will have access to an even wider selection of great indie content to take wherever they go."

Nintendo has revealed that over 100 indie games are in the works for Switch, showing off some of the most exciting this past month as it looks to lock its release window down until early 2018. This means that the console now has an enviable list of games on the way; some are simply fun to see, such as ports of *Morphies Law* and *Mom Hid My Game*, while others, such as the return of *No More Heroes* as a console exclusive, are huge. An all-new Super Meat Boy is great to see, as too is the final piece of the Shovel Knight puzzle and the console launch of the full *Kentucky Route Zero* experience; the Nintendo Switch is finally becoming a force to be reckoned with in the indie scene.



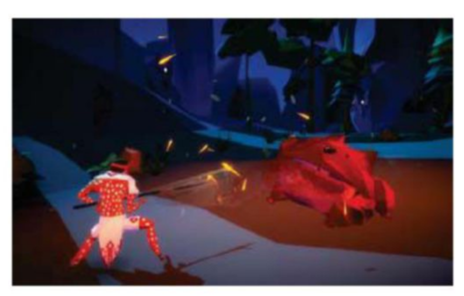
KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO: TV EDITION

1 Lauded by many to be one of the finest games of the decade, *Kentucky Route Zero* is finally receiving its long-awaited fifth act and console port as it arrives on Switch in early 2018. A must-own, *Kentucky Route Zero* is a stunning episodic adventure with fantastic writing and an unforgettable style.



DRAGON: MARKED FOR DEATH

2 This retro-inspired side-scrolling RPG looks like a wonderful compliment to Switch's handheld functionality. Delivering 30 enormous quests worth of adventure to battle through, four unique classes to play with, and offering co-op play for a bigger challenge, *Dragon* is set to be a timed Switch exclusive launching this winter.



MULAKA

3 Coming in hot with a wonderful art and animation style, *Mulaka* is an upcoming action-adventure title from developer Lienzo. In it you'll go up against an array of mythical creatures, solve puzzles and undergo an array of magical transformations – all inspired by northern Mexico, and its indigenous Tarahumara culture.



GOLF STORY

4 One of the most unique games to be announced for Nintendo's Switch so far, *Golf Story* is a wicked subversion of both golf games and 16-bit RPGs. It does, in fact, combine the two, switching out swords for golf clubs in this rather mad golf-RPG – perhaps the first of its kind.



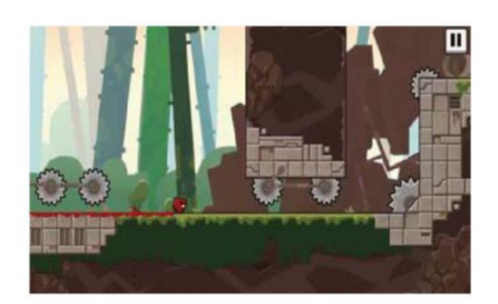
WULVERBLADE

5 Inspired by beat-'em ups from the early Nineties, *Wulverblade* is a stunning hand-drawn 2D action game that has more going for it than looks alone. Played alone or with a friend, this upcoming release from Darkwind Media is going to challenge and delight you in equal measure.



FLOOR KIDS

6 This unique rhythm-based action game from MERJ puts you in the shoes of a group of breakdancers who are looking to earn respect from their fellow street dwellers, pushing you to learn, combine and bust out a huge variety of fresh moves to original beats by Kid Koala.



SUPER MEAT BOY FOREVER

7 Team Meat is back! Truth told, our controllers had only just about recovered from the pain inflicted upon them by *Super Meat Boy*, but here we are, back in action with *Super Meat Boy Forever*. Featuring levels that get more challenging each time you beat them, new moves, and a new control scheme, just promise us you won't throw your Switch in a rage when it whips your ass.



MORPHIES LAW

8 One of the most original takes on the online shooter genre we've seen in a while; *Morphies Law* sees your avatar's mass shift as you inflict damage upon your enemies. Should you, for example, shoot somebody in the legs, you'll find that your own become larger – simultaneously ensuring that not only can you can jumper higher, but your calves become a bigger target.



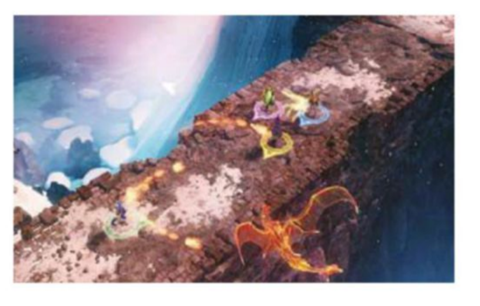
LOST SPHEAR

9 Coming from the studio behind critically acclaimed JRPG *I Am Setsuna*, *Lost Sphear* will see you adventuring across a gorgeous world in an attempt to stop the fabric of reality from unravelling. A reimagined turn-based battle system, an engrossing story, and rich character design are just a few of the things to expect from this January 2018 release.



MOM HID MY GAME

10 *Mom Hid My Game* is a deliriously bizarre game that brings back fond memories of *Wario Ware*. Here you are tasked with going scene to scene looking for your hidden game console, interacting with increasing difficult environmental puzzles whilst trying to avoid your mother – get caught and it's game over.



NINE PARCHMENTS

11 Frozenbyte, the studio behind *Trine* and *Has-Been Heroes*, is back with yet another interesting looking Switch game. *Nine Parchments* is a local and online co-op game, supporting up to four players, as you go off in search of monsters to blast in the face with ancient magics – it looks like fantastic fun.



SHOVEL KNIGHT: KING OF CARDS

12 As the final adventure in the Shovel Knight Treasure Trove saga, *King Of Cards* will see four new worlds and 30 new courses coming to Switch in 2018. Shovel Knight is, of course, a faithful homage to classic Metroid and Castlevania franchises of old, imbuing the style with a intoxicatingly engaging modern flair.

CHAOS REIGNS IN TRAVIS STRIKES AGAIN: NO MORE HEROES

SUDA51 RETURNS TO THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR FOR THIS PRETTY MAD SWITCH EXCLUSIVE

FORMAT: **SWITCH** | PUBLISHER: **MARVELOUS INC** | DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Say what you will about Suda51, but you can't help but respect his resilience. While Nintendo has always been known for its 'E For Everyone' approach to game making and marketing, there are but a handful of studios that have been committed to splashing blood all over that squeaky clean image. The most notable of these came about in 2002; an ensemble of Japanese developers that were part of the 'Capcom Five' initiative, delivering *Killer7*, *Viewtiful Joe*, *P.N.03* and *Resident Evil 4*. Goichi Suda was responsible for the *Killer7* portion of that endeavour and his commitment to surrealist violence and anarchic humour remains steadfast.

Suda51 went on to form his own studio, Grasshopper Manufacture, and continued to support Nintendo platforms, playing against the image of the hardware to deliver *No More Heroes*, a game that – much like *Killer7* – is imbued with an ambitious, creative and totally unhinged spirit that the developer was synonymous with. It was followed up beautifully by an equally insane sequel, but frankly we never imagined we would get the pleasure of seeing Travis Touchdown again.

After months of teasing, Suda51 is back in action, taking his rightful place in the directorial seat for the first time in a decade. *Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes* is launching exclusively on Switch in 2018 and it's the kind of raucous 3D action title the system has been crying out for; violent and bizarre, it's a game we had begun to fear would escape Nintendo's latest system. And while a sequel to 2010's *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle* had been long rumoured, we honestly never expected to see something quite like this.

"We've received a tremendous amount of support from our fans over the years, and we are delighted to finally share Travis Touchdown's next great adventure with fans of Nintendo Switch," said Suda51 in a prepared release. "We're ecstatic to be expanding the No More Heroes universe in 2018, and we can't wait to share more information with you in the coming months."

You see, *Travis Strikes Again* isn't a traditional sequel but neither is it a spin-off. It is in fact a blend of both, the return of Travis Touchdown and a celebration of the blossoming indie scene, delivered in a typically disorienting fashion – as Suda51 and Grasshopper are known to do. Once again taking command of the Beam Katana, *Travis Strikes Again* will see us massacre our way through countless enemies, taking on insane bosses, and shattering the fourth wall to great effect as we do battle against the legendary Badman inside of a haunted videogame console. Yep, you read that correctly. We learned a long time ago that it isn't worth questioning such insanity.

As you may remember, the end of *No More Heroes* saw Travis inflict fatal wounds on Badman's daughter, Badgirl, and now the bat-wielding father is on the warpath for revenge. During a confrontation, as seen in the reveal trailer, the pair are sucked inside the phantom game console, the 'Death Drive MK-II' and given the opportunity to have their dreams made reality.

> "THE COMBINATION OF INDIE GAME CHALLENGES AND NO MORE HEROES' SPECIFIC BRAND OF KINETIC ACTION IS AN ABSURDLY WONDERFUL MIXTURE"

Eagled-eyed gamers will notice that Doctor Juvenile's Death Drive console was actually first teased in Grasshopper's PS4-exclusive *Let It Die*, and now it's here to set the stage for one hell of a strange adventure. Inside the console Travis and Badman will need to collect and beat six games to have their wishes granted, and those six games will be tied with IP from the real world. The trailer showed off one such, that of Dennaton Games' *Hotline Miami*, while Suda has since revealed that Yacht Club Games' *Shovel Knight* will have some kind of presence. The combination of indie game challenges and No More Heroes' specific brand of kinetic action is an absurdly wonderful mixture, and – knowing what we do of the team behind it – *Travis Strikes Again* will no doubt be one of the most overtly strange releases of 2018. We can't wait.

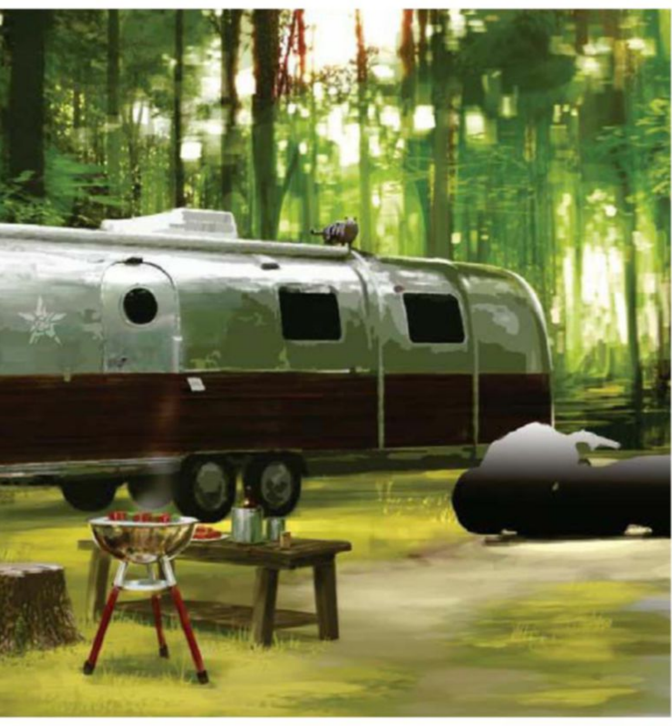


Inset: Suda51 has confirmed that this isn't a full sequel to *No More Heroes 2*, but instead an opportunity to reintroduce players to the world and its crazy characters.





Below: Travis Touchdown returns, but to escape the fury of Badman he will need to jump in and out of reality to recharge and take breaks between battles.



■ Below: *Travis Strike Again: No More Heroes* takes place inside of the Death Drive MK-II, a phantom games console that made its debut in *Let It Die*.



IN BRIEF

Grasshopper Manufacture is crashing the action of *No More Heroes* and some of the biggest independent games together in the mad sequel to the 2007 Wii classic

STYLE WITH SUBSTANCE

A closer look at one of gaming's coolest protagonists

■ *Travis Strikes Again* is a new take on the established No More Heroes slash-'em-up style, with each of the six game worlds you enter changing the individual gameplay rules, the vibe of the game world and the general presentation. While the worlds are under wraps, one will be a retro-inspired vector world full of scan-lines and graphical glitches.

■ Suda51 has teased that while his team is interested in integrating motion control back into No More Heroes, his biggest priority is to ensure that the entire game can be played with a single Joy-Con. It isn't clear why this is, but he has joked it's because he wants Masahiro Sakurai to put Travis Touchdown into *Super Smash Bros*.



■ If you thought Travis Touchdown sounded a little *off* in that trailer, it's likely because the original voice actor for the Western localisation – Robin Atkin Downes – doesn't seem to be returning. Downes is part of the ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike for voice actors in the US, trying to secure better working conditions in the industry.

■ *Travis Strikes Again* is something of a new beginning for the No More Heroes franchise. At least, that's how the development team is viewing it. While *Travis Strikes Again* will carry on, and wrap up, one aspect of the existing story, Grasshopper hopes that this is a bold new beginning for Travis Touchdown.

CAN PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS SUCCEED AS AN ESPORT?





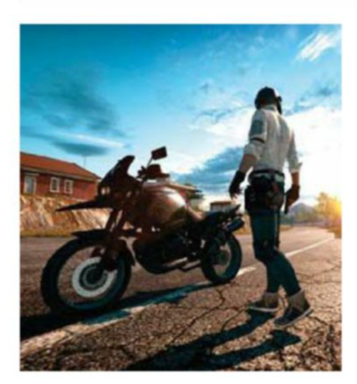
➔ HERE'S WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE AND STAY THE SAME AFTER PUBG'S FIRST MAJOR COMPETITIVE TOURNAMENT

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BLUEHOLE** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **2017** | PLAYERS: **1-100**

T **In August the unthinkable happened: *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* became the most popular PC game in the world.** With over eight million sales in just five months of early access release, *Battlegrounds* recorded an unprecedented number of concurrent players on Steam, 877,844 to be exact – knocking *DOTA 2* off of the top spot. This coincided with the game's first steps into the realms of esports, with ESL hosting the PUBG Invitational at Gamescom; with $350,000 on the line for the LAN tournament, it was our first taste of how the release would impact the scene, and it has given us plenty to chew over. After spending hours watching battle royal in action, we have pinpointed four areas Bluehole needs to focus on to make this a success.

IN BRIEF

Literally the biggest PC game in the world, an all-out battle royal where you must do anything to be the last player standing



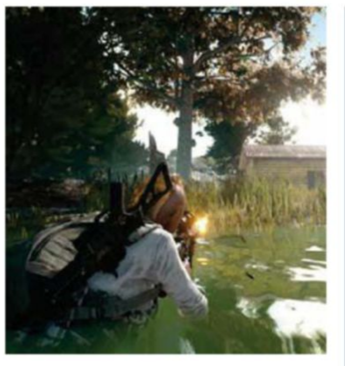
STEADY EXPANSION

1 When we spoke with Brendan Greene, PlayerUnknown himself, earlier in the year his message was one of slow and steady expansion. A cautious approach is the best thing for *Battlegrounds*, especially as Green has a clear vision for success. "We have to get the game in a competitive state before we even think about going into esports. We can't expect an esport community to form around a game that still has bugs and isn't stable for all players," he says, noting that working closely with partners such as the ESL Gaming Network is the next step. "We are going to really start researching it, to see what the best way for us to move forward might be; we don't want to rush it."



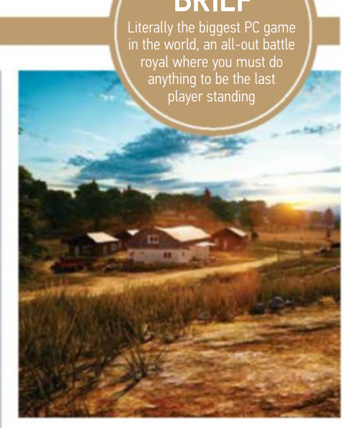
DECIDE A RULE SET

2 The Gamescom Invitational was met with some degree of controversy as former professional *Overwatch* player, Kyo-min "Evermore" Koo, won the solo competition by actively avoiding engagements – hiding in the blue zone, using healing items to keep himself alive until confrontation was absolutely necessary. It didn't make for fantastic viewing, but it sure was effective; it didn't break the rules, but it was an expert gaming of *Battleground*'s core systems. ESL will need to settle on a competitive rule set for future competitions – although a ban on sitting in the blue zone wouldn't work. Instead ESL will need to re-address the way it handles point scoring, or Bluehole will need to tinker with survivability on the backend to discourage this kind of play.



FIX THE PERSPECTIVE

3 One of the biggest debates in gaming this year has been over perspective. Bluehole has started rolling out first-person only servers across the regions and it has split the community right down the middle. You have a set of players, largely those that have been there from the start, that maintain that the third-person perspective is the way the game is intended to be played – although a vocal contingency insist that first-person only gameplay is much better for fostering tense engagements and competition. The perspective shift brings about a change in proficiency and playstyle, and decisions will need to be made as to which is considered the standard on the competitive scene for *Battlegrounds* to really take off and challenge *CS:GO*.



WORK ON PRODUCTION

4 To be fair to the ESL production team, this was always going to be a difficult setup to pull off and, all things considered, the folks behind the scenes did a bloody good job with it. With 100 players vying for survival in disparate pockets of a sprawling map, focusing on key engagements and trying to accurately develop interesting storylines was a seemingly impossible task. The camera would cut away from players inches from an important battle; it would lag behind requests from the commentary team – who were fantastic, it has to be said – and would sometimes focus on players doing literally nothing. This will need to be improved, but it will likely take some time to work out all the kinks.


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IN BRIEF

Battlefront returns with three eras of Star Wars, a full campaign mode, and a new class system for multiplayer

ACE IN THE HOLE

➔ How Battlefront II's new Star Cards will help you tweak the way you approach loadout





Choosing which ship you want to take into battle is your first important choice – the zippy A-Wing is useful for hit and run attacks and manoeuvring in tight spaces, while the slower but more durable TIE Bomber, with its multi missile and duel torpedo abilities, is useful for dishing out and taking heavy damage, to give a couple of examples. *Battlefront II*'s new Star Cards add an extra layer of choice when it comes to your loadout. These unlockable cards offer small tweaks to enhance your ship's abilities or tweak it towards your playstyle. For the TIE Bomber, for example, we opted for cards that improved our hull's health and reduced the time we needed for missiles to lock, making us deadly against enemy ships that tried taking us on one on one.



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II
REACHES FOR THE STARS

➔ WE SEE POSITIVE SIGNS IN OUR HANDS-ON TIME WITH THE NEW STARFIGHTER ASSAULT MODE

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **EA** | DEVELOPER: **EA DICE** | RELEASE: **17 NOVEMBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1-40**

Weren't happy with the lack of maps there were for the first *Battlefront*'s best modes? Here comes DICE promising three times more content in *Battlefront II* and free updates to prevent the player base splitting. Felt that the game lacked depth and didn't do enough to encourage teamplay? Here comes DICE again, rolling out a brand-new class system for the sequel. Disappointed in the lack of single-player options? DICE has got a full campaign mode in the works to keep you happy. The message the studio is trying to get out is clear: it has taken criticisms of the first game to heart and is focused on addressing those issues for the sequel. Our hands-on time with the new Starfighter Assault mode gives us confidence that the desire to address the first game's weaknesses is a genuine one.

DICE's first *Battlefront* had its own space-based dog-fighting equivalent, Fighter Squadron, where the goal was to take out opposing fighters until you hit the score limit and won the match. It was OK. A nice little distraction. But it was simplistic and did little to encourage any kind of coordinated, tactical, teamplay. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't long before most people binned it off in favour of *Battlefront*'s better modes.

Starfighter Assault aims to change that. Each map has a unique set of objectives, tied to the setting and the era where it takes place. That's already a marked improvement over *Battlefront*'s Fighter Squadron mode, where different maps only really offered you a different background to do the same thing in. Objectives give the mode structure, a fishbone story for the battle you're taking part in, and a reason to work together as a team.

The map we played was called Imperial Shipyard and takes place off the planet Fondor. The Rebels were tasked with taking out the Imperial defences, downing the Imperial Star Destroyer's shield generators, then exposing and attacking the reactor to destroy it. Playing as the Imperials, our goal was to crush the Rebel scum that dared defy us. Even when you're on the defensive, as we were, the mode throws challenges your way to keep things interesting and to force you to tweak your tactics. AI-controlled Rebel Corvettes will periodically join the battle, and you'll have to deal with AI Y-Wings embarking on bombing runs to weaken your defences. This requires both teams to juggle their priorities and work together to ensure that your team isn't ignoring something that's going to result in a crushing defeat. As a Rebel, for example, should you protect your Y-Wings to ensure they get to unload their devastating payload, or are those Imperial boneheads deserting their posts en masse to head off the bombers, leaving a gap in their defences that you can exploit? As an Imperial, do you prioritise taking down that big Corvette, or should you join the teammates that might otherwise be overwhelmed by those pesky X-Wings swarming towards your Star Destroyer's shield generators?

> "OBJECTIVES GIVE THE MODE STRUCTURE, A FISHBONE STORY FOR THE BATTLE YOU'RE TAKING PART IN, AND A REASON TO WORK TOGETHER AS A TEAM"

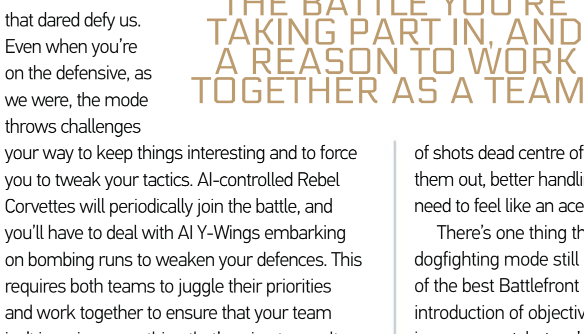
It's clear that far more thought has gone into this mode than did Fighter Squadron and its more compelling for it. Getting Criterion onboard to work on vehicle handling has evidentially paid dividends too. Whether banking swiftly to hug the contours of the station and shake off an attacker, or twisting and turning at speed through the guts of its architecture to stay on a foe's tail, holding your nerve, and landing a final volley of shots dead centre of the target reticule to take them out, better handling gives you the tools you need to feel like an ace fighter pilot.

There's one thing that hasn't changed: this dogfighting mode still doesn't feel representative of the best Battlefront has to offer. Yes, the introduction of objectives represents a huge improvement, but we'd still rather be playing ground-based modes. Indeed, if the steps forward we've experienced first-hand in this mode are representative of improvements we're going to see right across the board, then it's unlikely that Starfighter Assault is going to tear us away from the likes of the new ground-based 40-player Galactic Assault mode.





Above: Those smug rebel gits fly away in victory after destroying our beautiful Imperial Star Destroyer. Below: The laser pew-pews and whining engines of *Battlefront II*'s incredible sound design is still the most evocative part of the game's faithful recreation of the Star Wars universe.







10 THINGS WORTH KNOWING ABOUT BIOMUTANT



→ WITH A HERITAGE FROM JUST CAUSE AND MAD MAX, THIS IS AN RPG TO KEEP AN EYE ON



FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **THQ NORDIC** | DEVELOPER: **EXPERIMENT 101** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**



YOUR HERO IS CUSTOMISABLE

1 The little furry critter you play as can have different genders, fur lengths, head sizes, body sizes, colouring, tail types… you can even throw on a pair of wings at one point. You can basically mutate your character in any way you see fit and it will effect your gameplay options.

AND YOU KEEP CHANGING

2 Throughout the game it seems clear you will encounter new opportunities to manipulate your DNA and develop new abilities to go with it. That might mean changing your skin type altogether or growing new appendages. Frankly the possibilities are a little bewildering.

THERE'S A KARMA SYSTEM

3 Based on your actions and interactions your karma standing in the game will change and this will change your NPCs and how any potential companions will interact with you. That said there also appears to be a neutral play option that dismisses the whole concept of karma if you would prefer.

BUILD YOUR OWN WEAPONS

4 Your primary combat tools are a melee weapon and dual-wielded guns and these can be built from random pieces of junk you find out in the world. The resulting combinations and effects can be pretty fun. Electric swords, radioactive bullets and freeze guns are just some we've seen.

YOU ARE A WEAPON

5 On top of the physical mutations that you have available to you throughout the game, there are also a bunch of psi-powers to be unlocked. Telekinesis, control over a swarm of moths and the ability to fire bolts of electricity from your paws are just a handful of examples.

IN BRIEF

Explore and conquer an open world as a customisable and ever-evolving furry warrior, built by a brand new Swedish studio







YOU CAN CHAIN IT ALL TOGETHER

6 Inspired by wushu combat and we're guessing no small amount of *Devil May Cry*, you can chain together your various offensive traits into devasting combos, juggling enemies into the air, firing on groups and slashing them to pieces. The fighting system looks pretty fun.

IT'S OPEN WORLD

7 Yep, not only is there loads of customisation and crafting, but there's also a massive sandbox for you to explore and take in, however you see fit. No word yet on exactly what size of world we're looking at, but there are definitely a variety of environment types from forests to tundra to deserts.

THERE ARE VEHICLES

8 It's no surprise that with a big sandbox, you'll be able to use something for some speedier travel around the world. Since this is a post-apocalyptic, somewhat cyberpunk-style game there are some pretty cool things happening in this department, such as a cool jet ski.

THERE ARE REALLY ODD VEHICLES

9 The best mountable craft we've seen so far is a kind of hand-shaped mini tank that skitters around like Thing from *The Addam's Family* and fires rounds by miming the shape of a gun. It's hilarious. Plus you'll apparently be able to craft or find jet packs and all sorts of other things.

THE WHOLE THING IS NARRATED

10 Reminding us a little of *Bastion*, Biomutant is narrated by a character from the game, yet to be revealed. He's a little annoying, to be honest, but apparently he scales down his chatter the more you play so hopefully this won't get in the way and might even add something cool to the experience.

WHY THE XBOX ONE X MARKS A NEW DAWN FOR MICROSOFT

→ MICROSOFT MARKETING MANAGER ALBERT PENELLO REFLECTS ON RECORD BREAKING PREORDERS AND WHAT COMES NEXT

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE X** | PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **7 NOVEMBER** | PLAYERS: **N/A**

As the Xbox One X approaches its launch we sat down with Albert Penello, Xbox marketing manager, to talk a little about how the console has been received and how it fits in the company's overall strategy. Given some great initial preorder figures, those predicting that the console wouldn't connect with gamers were seemingly off the mark, so we had to wonder if a disconnect had emerged between analysts and consumers and Penello seemed uniquely placed to give us Microsoft's view on things. If nothing else, he exemplifies the brighter, cheerier face of Xbox that we've come to expect in the last couple of years.

With the Xbox One X breaking your previous preorder speed records things must be feeling pretty good at the moment?

It really has been great. I mean, it seems like we talked a lot about Scorpio, but we really didn't say much. We said very little when we unveiled it at E3 in 2016, we maybe had some occasional clarifications, but we really didn't say anything for that year. So, there's been a lot of news between E3 and today just in terms of the name and preorders and the ID and the final specs. It's been an exciting time.

It's been said in the past that Xbox expects the Xbox One S will sell more units than the Xbox One X, so has the preorder response surprised you?

It's interesting, but I want to be careful with this one. It's totally fine, it's just that I think we can be excited by something, and I think you always get the naysayers who look at that and question the preorders and I just want to put it in the right context. It is what it is. It definitely exceeded our expectations. In 2013 when we did preorders for the original Xbox One, people tend to forget that we actually had a great launch. We did more volume of preorders and faster preorders than any other console, so in my mind I wanted to see what we were going to do compared to that. The fact that we did more units faster than the Xbox One to me is a good sign. It was the first time that customers got to vote about how they felt about this. So, instead of all of the internet chatter and the industry chatter about it, we got to see customers vote, so I'm excited. I'm really glad and it did exceed our expectations. We still have to launch and we're still going to see what's going to happen. I still think that we're going to sell all of the units that we can make. I think it's going to be a big hit and I still think Xbox One S will probably outsell it.

IN BRIEF

The Xbox One X is the most powerful console to date boasting 4K rendering power and lots of player-friendly initiatives

Speaking about the naysayers and chatter there were tough questions about 'who is this console for?'. Do you think the response has answered that?

Yeah, I have been in the games business for a long time and I've work at retail, I've worked at different games companies and I love the industry. When the team started thinking about Project Scorpio, we had a chance to ask ourselves these questions. We really, really wanted to do it right and the fundamental thing that



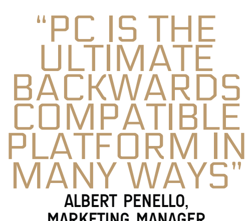
WHY BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY MATTERS

➔ A new lease of life for old games

It's been suggested that not many people are actually playing Xbox 360 games on Xbox One, so we asked Penello if backwards compatibility is really all that important? "It matters to people," he insists. "It matters to them emotionally. I have lived through every console generation, since I was working at retail when the 8-bit Nintendo went to the SNES and I watched people go through that emotional, 'I own this huge library of games and I have to throw that investment away'. People care about that. And people do go back. There are tons of stats and we play the stats game all the time about how when *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* came back on backwards compatibility it went to the top of the charts and so people are going to be playing the hell out of *Fusion Frenzy* again and they're going to love it. I think it's a great thing and I do think it signals that when you invest in Xbox, when you come and join the Xbox team, that games and your community are going to stay with you. It's a big investment for us."

■ The Xbox One X is the fastest selling preorder console that Microsoft has produced, which is doubly impressive given its price-point and how strong its previous numbers have been.

drove us was how do we respect the console business? How do we maintain all of the things that are great and interesting about a console launch, but we also recognise that it is tough on the industry. It is tough on consumers. It is tough of developers and retailers to go through these generational shifts. So we got to ask ourselves these questions and we then got to answer it with the product that we built. Everything that we've done with compatibility, the port locations, how we messaged it, how we named it are all questions we've been asking ourselves at the same time. We say things like if you buy an Xbox One S that is literally, perfectly fine. I don't like segmenting the consoles by core gamer and casual gamer, because Xbox One users have bought Elite 360 consoles for years that cost a lot of money. Maybe I just want to buy the greatest thing. Maybe I care about 4K, but I'm only playing *Cuphead*. There are all kinds of reasons why people make these choices; I want to give them the choice. The industry is asking the right questions, good questions, but it's a very console-generational type of question. I think real customers, they're used to this.



It feels as if the messaging around the Xbox is much more open now. More of a 'come join us any way that you can, we don't mind'. Does that sound right to you?

I appreciate that people view it that way, because Phil [Spencer] talks a lot about there being great older games and they're not state of the art, but they're still great. You lose that with console generations. With PC you don't lose that. PC is the ultimate backwards compatible platform in many ways and so really Play Anywhere and the effort we've put into going back to OG Xbox titles, the work that we put in to make games run better on Xbox One X, it's all about how people today think about their content on their devices. I don't want to leave my content behind. I don't want to leave my games behind. The device itself, I'll upgrade when I feel ready to upgrade. Some people buy phones every year, some people get on the skip model. People are used to doing this, but yeah, people care more about the games and also people play on more devices than they did.

You mentioned how people use their smartphones, so do you now see that as how consoles will be, that every couple of years there will be an option to upgrade?

I don't know. I've certainly said this before, I don't think the every year model is good either. So, I like to take the things that are great about phones and PCs but still respect what's great about the console business. I do think compatibility is going to be increasingly important going forward. So, whether it's more iterative or there's a bigger leap in tech, from us that compatibility is going to be a key driver for us in making sure that your content goes with you.

IN BRIEF
A pleasant throwback 3D platformer that wants you to attack enemies, grab collectibles and explore a pleasant, well-crafted world

CAN SUPER LUCKY'S TALE BE MICROSOFT'S KEY MASCOT GAME?

➔ EXECUTIVE PRODUCER NATHAN ROSE RUNS US THROUGH THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE KNOWN ABOUT THE UPCOMING ADVENTURE GAME

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** | DEVELOPER: **PLAYFUL** | RELEASE: **7 NOVEMBER 2017** | PLAYERS: **1**



IT'S A TRUE SEQUEL

1 Many people think that *Super Lucky's Tale* is just a re-release of *Lucky's Tale* for the Oculus Rift on Xbox One - but they're mistaken. The game is actually a full, true sequel as executive producer Nathan Rose explains to us: "It's a much larger game, with many more open areas for you to explore as well, this should give you more fun when you're exploring what we're creating. We've also added 4K and spatial audio, too!"

LUCKY HAS EVOLVED

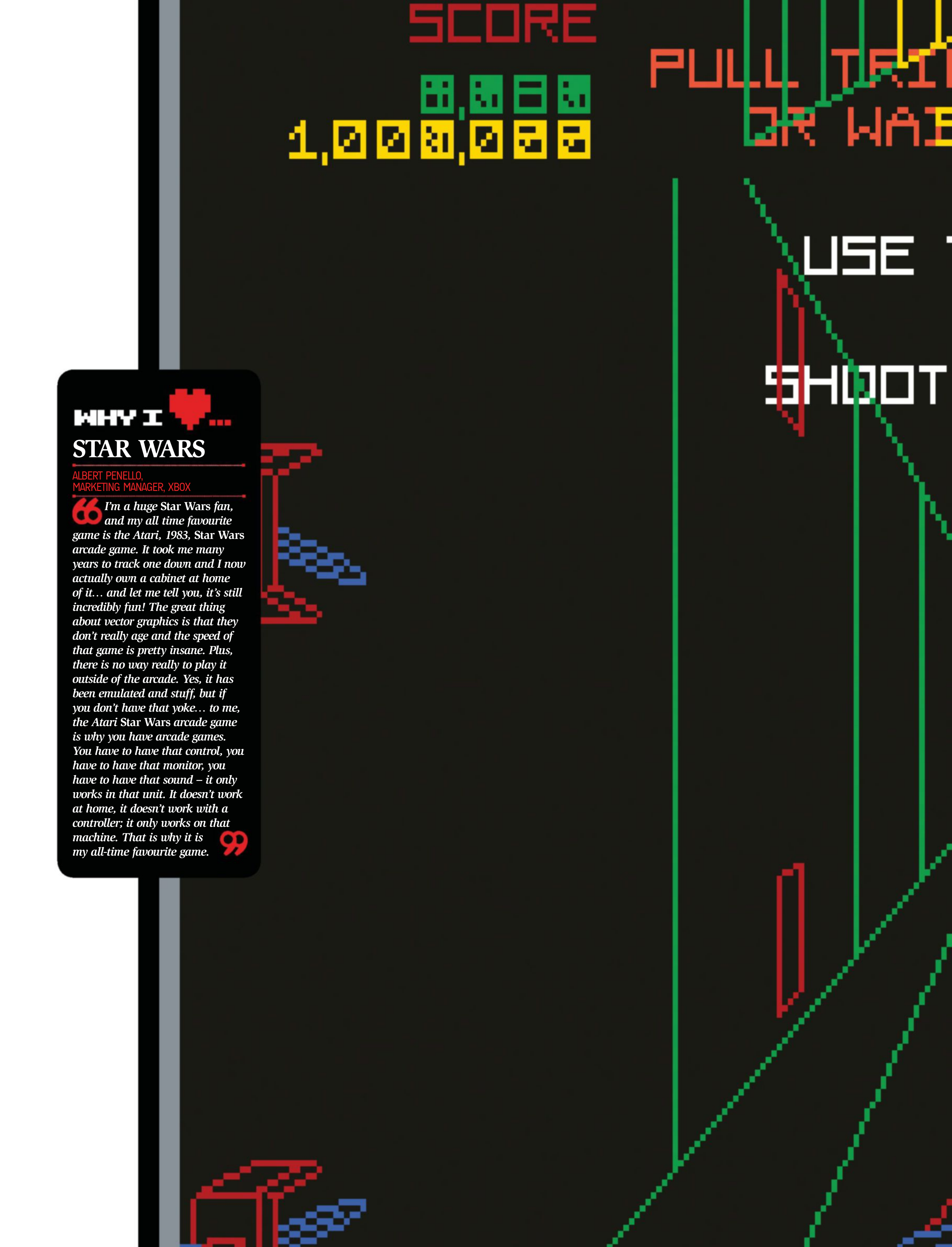
2 "If you were to hold the current *Lucky* side-by-side with the original one, you'll see some noticeable differences in his visual appearance," Rose explains to us when he talks about how developer Playful has updated the mascot character – a character, which he earlier described as 'Disney-like'. "We've also added moves to him: we've given him a new move which changes gameplay up and allows you to explore a little bit more."

IT'S UNIQUE ON XBOX ONE

3 "We felt there was a need to have [something character-driven] on the Xbox One platform – there isn't any other title like this right now, especially from Microsoft," Rose explained when we asked him why Playful wanted to bring the game to the Xbox console family. "Microsoft evaluated that [a full sequel was in the works], saw Playful as a true partner, and since then the studio has been fantastic to work with throughout the whole experience."

IT'S HARD TO GET BORED OF

4 "I've been in the industry over 25 years," Rose explained to us (he's shipped everything from mobile games to cinematic platformers, such as *Abe's Exodus*!) "With *Super Lucky's Tale*, it's something I just never get tired of playing. We've had this build a little while now and I just never get bored of it!" With games like *Yooka-Laylee* splitting critical opinion recently, *Super Lucky's Tale* might be the universally appealing 3D platformer we've been waiting generations for.



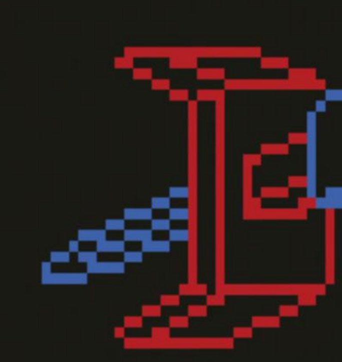
WHY I ♥…

STAR WARS

ALBERT PENELLO,
MARKETING MANAGER, XBOX

“I’m a huge Star Wars *fan, and my all time favourite game is the Atari, 1983,* Star Wars *arcade game. It took me many years to track one down and I now actually own a cabinet at home of it… and let me tell you, it’s still incredibly fun! The great thing about vector graphics is that they don’t really age and the speed of that game is pretty insane. Plus, there is no way really to play it outside of the arcade. Yes, it has been emulated and stuff, but if you don’t have that yoke… to me, the Atari* Star Wars *arcade game is why you have arcade games. You have to have that control, you have to have that monitor, you have to have that sound – it only works in that unit. It doesn’t work at home, it doesn’t work with a controller; it only works on that machine. That is why it is my all-time favourite game.”*





> “To me, the Atari Star Wars arcade game is why you have arcade games”
>
> **ALBERT PENELLO, MARKETING MANAGER, XBOX**





"THESE WERE NOT SUPERSOLDIERS. THEY WERE JUST GUYS"

CALL OF DUTY WWII

WE SPEAK EXCLUSIVELY TO SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES' GENERAL MANAGER GLEN SCHOFIELD AND CALL OF DUTY'S RESIDENT MILITARY HISTORIAN MARTIN MORGAN ABOUT THE STUDIO'S MISSION TO HONOUR THE STORIES OF WORLD WAR II AND, IN THE PROCESS, RENEW THE BIGGEST FPS FRANCHISE EVER KNOWN

DUTY BOUND

13 games in 13 years, and yet this may be the first COD driven by a very real sense of duty. We are speaking with Glen Schofield, general manager and co-founder of Sledgehammer Games; as we do, we begin to remember what it is that made us fall in love with this series to begin with – and, by extension, we become increasingly aware of where it may have lost us along the way.

Were you to strip away the speed, the noise, and the furious energy that has fuelled the last decade of instalments into the unstoppable Call Of Duty war machine, you'll find the same pattern emerge. Experiences built around tightly controlled and paced scenes of action, weaved together with mesmerising, memorable setpieces. Power fantasies fetishising military culture, specifically designed to engage with our cultural obsession towards war and violence on a globe-shattering scale. We have taken great joy in playing the supersoldier, in letting these scenarios arrest the attention, but very rarely have they had anything meaningful to say or reflect upon. They are what they are: products of entertainment and proud of it. For Sledgehammer Games, though, that is no longer enough.

It's as Schofield chews over what *Call Of Duty: WWII* is trying to achieve, and what it means to him, that we begin to understand how important this release is for the industry and for the players – and why it may have taken us so long to get here. "I hope we've handled this correctly," he will say to us considerately. Admittedly, our biggest questions going into this conversation were of tact and tone, and they were certainly the most important ones to be answered coming out. This is an important year for Call Of Duty, and it all starts this November with a campaign that's unlike any other in the series' long and chequered history.

"We consider ourselves to be entertainers; we make entertainment and we want to tell a good story," Schofield insists, wrestling with the push and pull of balancing the scale of Call Of Duty against the sensitivity of the subject matter. "But our job is not only to entertain; I believe that good art provokes thought. We want this to be provocative and thought-provoking. There are areas that are very sensitive [and] we've definitely managed to show parts of the [Second World] War that have not been shown in a videogame before. We're quite proud of that. Quite proud of some of the ways that we've handled it all," he says, pausing for a second: "I hope that we've handled it correctly."

World War II may have been the setting that Call Of Duty built its reputation around, but in a sense this will mark its most direct and important interaction with it. The level of fidelity and realism that a development team – especially one as talented as Sledgehammer – can confidently portray in the digital space is astounding. To deliver on this scale requires tact; a respect and a reverence for the details and, in 2017, a responsibility to those that have been affected by it along the way. This, when presented in flashy reveals or explosive showcases, has been difficult for both Sledgehammer Games and Activision to convincingly convey – to portray authenticity as a key pillar of the experience, rather than a phrase to tick off the marketing manifesto. It's only in conversation that you begin to get a real sense of the sentiment that lies behind the noise.

"When we first started out on the game, I'm not sure that responsibility was the word we were using – respect was the word," Schofield says. "But as we got deeper and deeper into development [we realised] there was a responsibility that went along with that respect, a responsibility to pull no punches. And that's what we do in the game; we talk about racism, we talk about the different things that went on during that time. And so, yeah, there is a responsibility to try and get it right… and we're not afraid."

It strikes us that a lack of fear might be essential in Sledgehammer Games' mission to return Call Of Duty to the Second World War. It has been 12 years since Infinity Ward's *Call Of Duty 2* and coming up on a decade since Treyarch closed out the World War II era for the franchise with *World At War*. As great as those titles were – particularly in the early days of the HD era – they were fairly hollow. A series of levels cast across a worldwide tour of duty, across the most explosive combat zones the respective developers could construct with the resources at hand. But *Call of Duty: WWII* isn't just a series of levels, it couldn't be; instead, it's a series of conflicts heavily rooted in reality. Schofield isn't afraid because he knows that going back to World War II would require a potent mixture of bravery and brevity. That's a combination that his studio has built its name and reputation on. Sledgehammer takes risks and defies expectations, and it does it with an attention to detail. It is one of the only studios in the industry that has what it takes to deliver a convincing shooter that is built around the horrors of the Second World War.

"WE CONSIDER OURSELVES TO BE ENTERTAINERS; WE MAKE ENTERTAINMENT AND WE WANT TO TELL A GOOD STORY"

GLEN SCHOFIELD, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

FROM ADVANCE TO PAST

Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare was a confident solo debut for Sledgehammer. The studio had already proved it was capable, working alongside Infinity Ward to get *Modern Warfare 3* out of the door in 2011, but *Advanced Warfare* was something else. Something bigger. It pushed the franchise further into the future than it had ever dared go before, changing the way players interacted with everything from the map lanes, the vertical spaces, the weaponry and basic momentum systems that had been rooted in place for years. It was a success too. The safe bet, you'd have thought, would have been for Sledgehammer to spend three years working on a sequel; implementing new and wonderful ways to let us defy gravity, use futuristic weaponry to shoot each other, and keep us dutifully entertained with another dead-eyed movie star. But the studio knew in 2014 what we were yet to learn; the stars were always meant to be explored by Call Of Duty players, but eventually it would have to come back to earth.

"It's funny because we were at this point three years ago," chuckles Schofield as we wonder aloud where the desire to return to the past has suddenly stemmed from. "The other two future games hadn't come out yet, but we did know that *Black Ops 3* was being developed. You know, we had talked about making *Advanced Warfare 2*…"

So, what changed? Risk is part of the DNA of this studio. Co-founders Schofield and Michael Condrey left Dead Space, Visceral, and EA behind to take a risk on building this studio back in 2009. In that time it has swelled in size and ambition, from 20 staff to 300 in eight years. But the last thing it wants to do is become complacent; it's driven by a desire »





The savagery of battle wasn't isolated to the events of D-Day and this game will be exploring many of the events that immediately followed that bloody and crucial incursion into Europe.









BAND OF BROTHERS

The faces in the crowd of the 1st Infantry Division









RONALD "RED" DANIELS

Private Daniels is the player character through whom you'll be experiencing most (if not all) of what *COD: WWII* has to offer. He's never left home before.

JOSEPH TURNER

First Lieutenant Turner is your platoon leader in the 1st Infantry Division, a graduate of West Point and noted to be a born leader. He's being played by Jeffrey Pierce, a returning COD voice actor.

WILLIAM PIERSON

We fully expect Technical Sergeant Pierson to be the hard-ass of the squad. He apparently enlisted in the Army at the age of 16 having falsified his documents to get in early. He's already a vet at 34.

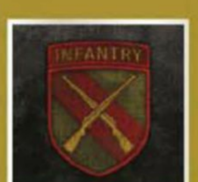
ROBERT ZUSSMAN

Private First Class Zussman is another young recruit who has signed up to serve specifically in this war. His Jewish heritage is likely to give him additional motivation in this conflict.



KNOW YOUR DIVISIONS

What COD's new class system means



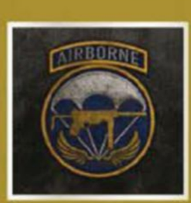
INFANTRY

Your essential grunt soldier, good for all seasons, particularly in offensive play. The Infantry Division is armed with an M1 Garand rifle, along with a Colt 1911 pistol and frag grenades. A bayonet on their rifle makes them suitable for medium and short range encounters



EXPEDITIONARY

Possibly best described as an aggressive scout force, the Expeditionary Division is built for close-range combat with a shotgun that can fire incendiary rounds and an increased resistance to explosive damage. If the map is tight and the fighting intense then this is the class you need.



AIRBORNE

A popular choice during the *COD: World War II* beta, the Airborne Division is armed with a sub-machine gun that (at least pre-launch) is incredibly effective. A muzzle on their guns and smoke grenades make them an effective force in quick hit and run attacks that leave the enemy guessing.



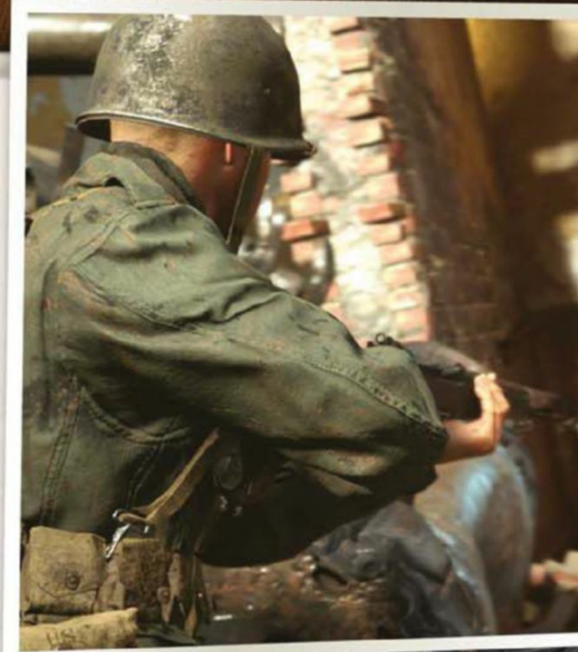
ARMORED

This is COD's new heavy class, built to take a beating and give one back twice as hard. With a light machine gun that can be mounted on ledges for increased stability as well as a rocket launcher, your Armored Division will break the enemy lines and clear paths for the Infantry.



MOUNTAIN

No COD would be complete without a sniper class and the Mountain Division is it. Sacrificing field of view, these sharpshooters can gain a momentary aim assist to make sure their shots ring true and every bullet they fire counts. Still a challenging role to play in Call Of Duty.



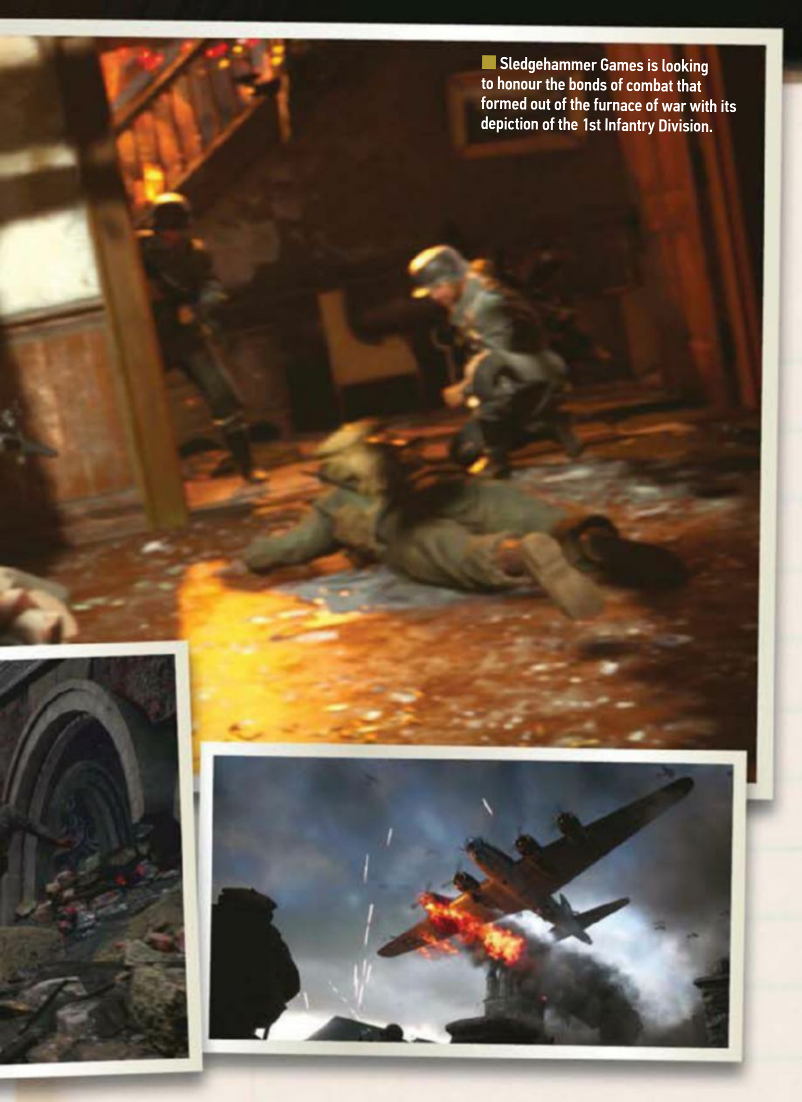


to innovate and improve, and you can see the result of that work at the heart of its latest project.

"We wanted to do something different. Most of us who work on Call Of Duty were fans of it before we came to it, you know? A lot of us played *Call Of Duty*, *Call Of Duty 2* and *3*, and it all started in World War II. The feeling of the team was that we should go back to our past and back to the [series'] roots," says Schofield, although he is quick to note that going back to the past was always going to be a risk for the studio. "You always worry, right? You know, 'is it the right decision?' But we didn't know if it was the right answer or not, we just knew that we were passionate about it. A lot of times passion fuels quality; passion can win a lot of things, it can win the day. I know that the company, Activision itself, is very keen that the studios work on projects that they are passionate about. When we came in and we were passionate about it, and they were too. We had the company on our side, and it [suddenly] felt like it wasn't as risky."

Sledgehammer had Activision on its side because the publisher knows what it is getting from the studio. Despite *Advanced Warfare* being set so many years in the future, it was built around painstaking research. The team put in its time, and the results were impressive. That is, in a sense, why Sledgehammer knew it was capable of delivering a respectful and authentic World War II shooter – the studio knows that the devil is in the detail.

"That is kind of at the heart of why we decided to go to World War II. We've spent the last three years studying the past, as opposed to spending three years looking into the future. *Advanced Warfare* was all about studying what *might*



Sledgehammer Games is looking to honour the bonds of combat that formed out of the furnace of war with its depiction of the 1st Infantry Division.





The facial capture and performances in Call Of Duty have been impressive for many years, but Sledgehammer has outdone itself from what we've seen so far from this game.

happen – coming up with ideas, studying science, things like that. A lot of it was about extrapolating what might happen in 45-to-50 years. For *Call of Duty: WWII*, it was a completely different creative challenge, and that's what we liked about it," Schofield says, although he assures us that this is what put Sledgehammer in a key position to make this happen.

"They both have their challenges. I think one of the big differences, in the future games, people can say 'well, I'm not sure that this could happen or not' and it is really just a matter of opinion; but if we get something wrong in the past, it isn't a matter of opinion, it is reality… we needed to get the details right," he says, before adding. "I think that our attention to detail was even stronger on this game."

Whether you are in the past or in the future, Schofield tells us, there are unwritten rules that every studio working in the Call Of Duty universe needs to follow. "Whether you are in the future or the past, authenticity is fairly important to us and realism is important to us. There are these unwritten rules with Call Of Duty that we need to follow. One is to make it authentic, to try and make it realistic; in terms of the gameplay, it has got to be 60 frames per second and we don't deviate from stuff like that; for multiplayer it is quick in and quick out, it has got to feel smooth, the guns have got to feel right; there are a bunch of pillars that we follow."

"At this point – and this is my eighth year working on Call Of Duty – you feel like it has been ingrained in you already, and that by this point we know where to come up against those rules, where we can break them a little bit, and how to advance them," says Schofield, and it's clear that *Call Of Duty: WWII* is being fuelled by a very real passion that drives its rule-breaking and advancement.

PROJECT OF PASSION

"I have to be very passionate about any project that I get into. Once I had begun studying this it didn't take long for me to realise and know that this was something that I really wanted to do." For Schofield this is personal. Attachment helps drive creativity, and that will potentially be the way in which this Call Of Duty is set apart from its predecessors.

There is only so much of a connection a creative team can form with stories entrenched in sci-fi insanity, and this far more grounded and intimate take on the classic formula is only improved by the raw passion being poured into it: "My passion for the World War II era started as a kid… I grew up in my [early] years on an army base in Texas," says Schofield; his father and uncle served in Vietnam, his Grandfather a veteran of the Italian campaign of the Second World War. "I wouldn't say I was a military kid but, in a way, I grew up with military as a release. When it came to working on *Call Of Duty: WWII*, I immediately went back and started looking into my grandfather's past, and started finding out more about his stories."

It is these stories – and the thousands of similar tales from the conflict, both tragic and heroic – that helped form the basis of this title's campaign, characters and ambience. *Call Of Duty: WWII* tracks a group of young American soldiers joining the war at Omaha beach; pushing out of Normandy and across Europe as the Allied forces make a push into Aachen, and, eventually, even deeper into Germany.

"We wanted to tell two stories. One with the overarching story of the ar, or at least the campaign that we're fighting in; the second part is the story of the platoon. That's really at the heart of this game, what these characters went through and what the soldiers went through," says Schofield, noting that famous conflict zones and battles such as Operation Cobra, Hurtgen Forest, Marigny, Hill 493, and the Battle Of The Bulge will all feature and push these characters harder than any Call Of Duty campaign has before. "Developing these characters was something that took us years. We wrote their back stories and then we continued to work on them and we then had Marty look over some of the dialogue and using the right military terms, things like that."

> "WE WANTED TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT. MOST OF US WHO WORK ON CALL OF DUTY WERE FANS OF IT BEFORE WE CAME TO IT"
> **GLEN SCHOFIELD, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES**

Sledgehammer was intent on building something authentic, respectful and responsible, and it wanted a very real emotional drive to be at the heart of the game's experience. And so it went outside of Activision for help. Call Of Duty games have often used scientists, historians and researchers to help build out elements of its game worlds – or to justify the inclusion of ridiculous robotics and weaponry, as would be the case in the futuristic instalments – but *Call Of Duty: WWII* went a step further.

"These characters are based on the same men who were swept into the full national mobilisation of the United States during the Second World War," reveals Martin 'Marty' Morgan, a military historian of great experience; an expert »



"IT BECAME CLEAR THAT WE COULD BE AS AUTHENTIC AS HELL AND STILL HAVE A REALLY, REALLY DYNAMIC GAME"
GLEN SCHOFIELD, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

THE RISK AND REWARD OF HEADQUARTERS

Sledgehammer's folly or foolproof hit?

On the surface of things the Headquarters mode, a kind of social hub lobby system that will be accessible between rounds of multiplayer in *Call Of Duty: WWII*, seems like a pretty amazing idea. However, think about it for a few moments and some issues may begin springing to mind. On the one hand you have a 48-player live lobby experience that will have you mingling with other players and offer you the opportunity to play around with some of your weapons and test yourself against the competition while you wait for your match to start. On the other hand this is the Call Of Duty online community; not exactly blessed with a pristine reputation and this could be an environment rich with possibilities for vile behaviour.

Thankfully it would seem that Sledgehammer is taking measures to mitigate such circumstances. For a start this loading area is packed full of distractions and activities that will hopefully make griefing other players a minor concern. Set on Normandy beach three days after the landing, it's a historically rich location that lets you tackle a firing range, compete in one-on-one pit fights and try out score streak rewards. Live scoreboards appear to track everyone's progress as you become more and more adept with each weapon, take on all comers in the pit and master those kill streak bonuses. The ability to test out the fighter planes and bombers before battle is particularly welcome as it gives even weaker players a taste of what they can get with practice.

We had our concerns about this lobby setup, fuelled partially by our experiences of the pre-match gatherings from *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, which can be a bit of a nightmare, but even if that does happen in this game, we think it will be short-lived. Headquarters could be a masterstroke.







The sound design team had the chance to fire a number of real WWII weapons in order to get some first-hand experience with the feel as well as the sound of the armaments they would be depicting.





on all things World War II who just so happens to specialise in the weaponry of the conflict. It was a match made in heaven. "They are citizen soldiers who came to Europe, who made their first step on the continent on D-Day and who had to then fight all the way across to the heartland of the Third Reich; all the way to Germany itself. It follows the experience of the citizen soldier through this ordeal, through about a year of warfare in Northern Europe. In this way it's more of a thoughtful introspection than I believe can be said for previous releases. This isn't just another first-person shooter. There's more to this game than that. It's more complicated, it's more theatrical, and it tells the story of citizen soldiers and their experience in combat."

How much input did Morgan have? A lot. His influence will be seen weaving in and out of almost every facet of the campaign experience. "It was a constant conversation. On a daily basis, [for over two years], I have been in contact with various parts of the development team, providing various kinds of input," says Morgan, explaining that his dealings with the studio started with the cosmetics. "There was a point for me where it became necessary to point out the specifics of US Army dress uniforms in 1945 to the artistic team, and that resulted in a spiralling series of emails that included artwork, comments, suggestions and citations – sometimes pointing at ten different things on this dress uniform – as the art team sincerely sought to get this correct."

"There was a point where we were talking about firearms and audio design, and I said something like 'well, you can just re-use all the recordings of the guns that you had back at *Call Of Duty: World At War*, right?'," Morgan and Schofield laugh as they tell this story. "And they just laughed in my face at the thought of using something from back then, because there has been such a shift in technology. I was a bit naive – I'm not a game designer, I'm a historian!"

We're told many stories like this, many examples of historical accuracy clashing with the realities of game design. The team sounds hellbent on getting the smallest aspects of the game accurate – to the extent that we have to wonder whether players will even notice. It would be easy enough for us to dismiss all of this, wouldn't it? What does it matter, right? You're all thinking it: what does getting the details right ultimately mean for a Call Of Duty campaign? The truth is, his influence and expertise has ensured that the team has been able to create something far larger, far grander and more shattering than anything it could conjure from the mind alone.

DRIVEN BY AUTHENTICITY

"At the beginning of development we had a big team, and they are all looking to me saying 'how authentic do you really want this to be?' and I'm like, 'well, we've got to make it fun, so who knows!'" Schofield notes, and this gets to the heart of why authenticity is so important to *Call Of Duty: WWII.* Real conflict and historical accuracy doesn't just inform the visual, audio and story design, it has had a very real influence on the mission and level construction – you may have seen a lot of these scenarios play out in other Call Of Duty and Medal Of Honor games in the past, but you have never experienced them quite them like this.

"It got to a point where he was helping out with missions and parts of the levels. As we started working more and more with Marty, it became clear that we could be as authentic as hell and still have a really, *really* dynamic game; a really epic game, maybe more so, because some of the stuff that happened in reality is beyond your imagination."

We promised Schofield that we would be careful to avoid spoilers here – there are over 25 million Call Of Duty players out there, and the last thing we want to do is ruin the fun for anyone – but there is one key example from the campaign that highlights this melding of proficiencies and minds. "I was looking for a big moment in the game. I needed to have a train crash – this big epic moment in the game. So I said to Marty: 'Hey Marty, I need a very important German train that is carrying something important, in France, somewhere in the Fall of 1944…"

The historian came back with a handful of examples, but the team quickly settled on one in particular. Around the site of the Battle Of The Bulge, Germany had a train responsible for ferrying the very first V-2 rockets. The rail yards on which this train stopped, it turns out, were the perfect site for some classic Call Of Duty moments, and the opportunity was far too good for Sledgehammer to pass up.

"It was even better than I had hoped because it became such an important train… when Marty said, 'oh yeah, by the way, when they come to a train station that they have all kinds of guards and officers there, trucks there – trucks filled with fuel!" says Schofield, although we hope that means that no red barrels are needed here. If *Call Of Duty: WWII* can get rid of some major videogame tropes *and* still build the perfect Call Of Duty playground you won't hear any complaints from us. "This was a case of reality being even better than what we had in our minds. So we started doing more and more of that."

"They went hand-in-hand; gameplay with realism and authenticity," he continues. "Combining them is a simultaneous process. For example, we would go into a town called Marigny and there is a church there – and the church really does exist – but we wanted to have combat within it. Now, we may have changed the interior a *little bit* so it could handle the gameplay, but that's one [example] in which we adapted the gameplay to fit a particular section."

Of course, one concern we did have is whether this campaign could still match the scale and grandeur that we've come to expect from a Sledgehammer release. Seeing how authenticity has informed everything from the story to the level design is certainly a sight to behold – worth praising – but there are many out there who still wouldn't want that to come at the expense of spectacle. How can Call Of Duty deliver when it features slower movement, no futuristic weaponry or momentum systems? Schofield tells us not to worry – and it has us *literally* counting down the days.

"Once you see this train crash in the game… it's probably as big as us blowing up the Golden Gate Bridge in *Advanced Warfare*. I mean, it is this big, giant moment," he says, and even goes into how the studio is looking to expand the nature of spectacle in this release. It doesn't want setpieces to be these stationary moments you see once and move on from; to capture the spirit of this conflict, it wants every big battle to be its own all encompassing setpiece. "Think about storming the beach at Normandy. That was, like… that was a giant setpiece that took months, and months, and months of work to get right. It isn't just this giant explosion, it's an experience."

DUCK AND WEAVE

Call Of Duty: WWII will still feature classic Call Of Duty moments; they will just be more authentic in their construction. Sledgehammer has spent the last three years getting this balance right. One mission will be set in the ruins of Aachen, for example, and Sledgehammer has had to develop specific technology to make it feel truly authentic; »

dropping you into the middle of the conflict zone in a tank, giving you the power and ability to level the buildings around you – after all, what's the point of putting you in a tank if you can't utilise its full potential?

With Sledgehammer streamlining the level design and tools at your disposal, it has also had to readdress the way in which you approach the moment-to-moment combat. Overhauls to the AI systems ensure that enemies put more focus on deadly flank tactics and suppressive fire – a worthy replacement to the wall-running and death-from-above adventures from before – although the biggest change is a fundamental shift for the franchise.

Call Of Duty campaigns have, in the past, been accused of being dressed up tutorials for multiplayer. That, as we've discovered, won't be the case here. While multiplayer will deliver the same frantic thrills of the past, the campaign is taking a different route. Regenerating health is out of the campaign, and this will have huge repercussions.

"When we started the game, in the first year of development, we had [health] regen in and it just felt weird," admits Schofield, giving us some insight into the iterative development process behind *WWII*. "We're being authentic and the guy was still able to stand up in the middle of the road, shoot 30 guys and then run behind a garbage can and get health? No. So, we started slowly experimenting with squad abilities and health packs."

If you're running out of health? There will be no ducking for cover and heroically recovering. If you take a hit, you'll need to look for your platoon to help you out of tight spots – they have health packs on reserve to help you out, although they will also be scattered about the levels. "They've actually made the game feel more World War II, because I can't stand and just take it. These were not supersoldiers. There were just guys. They didn't have body armour; you're not a meat shield, you can't just take bullets like before.

"Once you start to go [play] with health packs you learn that bullets are more important, you find yourself ducking down more. I'm looking for lines of sight. I'm looking for a way to go – I'm not just impulsively running forward. I'm thinking about where I'm going and what I'm doing a little bit more. And that was – as small as that may sound – a big deal in making the game feel better."

NEW GENERATION OF HISTORIANS

Using authenticity as a way of delivering a Call Of Duty experience unlike any other – as a way of paying respect to the tragedy and triumph that helped shape the modern world – is, of course, both incredible and noble in equal measure. But there's also something else at play here, something that's far, far more important. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about and reflecting on what we are doing here," considers Morgan. "We are making something that is going to have as much of a tectonic impact today as *Saving Private Ryan* did 20 years ago.

"I remember what it was like before *Saving Private Ryan* and then I remember what it was like *after Saving Private Ryan*. It really marked a watershed in the history of World War II, in that it changed lots of people. It attracted people to the subject matter, it gave birth to an entire generation of World War II historians in a very powerful way," he continues, although he believes that this could indeed make an even bigger impact that Spielberg's masterpiece. "When *Saving Private Ryan* came out in 1997 there was no social media. The reach was there for either theatrical or home video, the reach for this game is vastly bigger than that."



"WE ARE MAKING SOMETHING THAT IS GOING TO HAVE AS MUCH OF A TECTONIC IMPACT TODAY AS SAVING PRIVATE RYAN DID"

MARTIN MORGAN, MILITARY HISTORIAN

"There is going to be a generation or two of people, who are 25 and under, who might not even know anything about *Saving Private Ryan*," adds Schofield. "This [game] might be, as Marty said, where they are going to learn about World War II. We want them to know that we paid attention, that we got the details right."

You only have to look online or watch the news to see that the politics of the Second World War have resurfaced in a very real way, 70 years after the conflict came to an end. This makes the potential impact of *Call Of Duty: World War II* even more important – the team had to get this right, because the franchise is influential. Whether you believe videogames have the power to educate or inform players – or even whether they should – is beside the point; Call Of Duty is the biggest franchise in the world, with million upon millions of players. It's about damn time that it had something to say.

"This political climate, all it has done is reinforce to me that it's extremely important for people to have more exposure to the Second World War as a subject, with the overall objective of leading [some people] towards more than just a superficial understanding of what the war was," Morgan tells us, explaining how beneficial it would be for people to be aware of the deeper, nuanced and more sophisticated aspects of the war.

The emotional weight of the campaign will likely be in stark contrast to the action and ferocity of online multiplayer, but both are hugely impressive in their own right. We're very excited to play the final package.







"I cannot help but recognise that for people where the [Second World War] is less familiar – I'm not talking about me, I'm not talking about people that are aged closer to 50 – I'm talking about people who were born after the year 2000," Morgan says. "For those people they need to have a full understanding of what this conflict represents and, for them, they may need something that invites them into having a fuller and more sophisticated understanding. The best way to do that – the vehicle that has the greatest reach and therefore the greatest power – is to present the subject to them through the Call Of Duty franchise."

Call Of Duty: World War II is ambitious. Sledgehammer Games has spent three years putting this package together. It is attacking across three different fronts: a classic multiplayer experience that fans will sink the next year of their lives into, skinned to resemble World War II but as fast and frantic as ever; a horror-tinged zombies co-op experience, one that leans on the studio's past experience with the Dead Space series; and, most importantly, a campaign that wants to change the way we play Call Of Duty, that's as big and bold as anything that we've seen before from this franchise, only rooted in reality

When *Call Of Duty: WWII* is finally released on 3 November you will get the chance to find out if Sledgehammer has been able to realise its passion and ambition. As we said at the start, it has certainly reawakened our love of the series.

FIVE THINGS THAT MAKE WAR MODE GREAT

What we love about COD's newest multiplayer contest



1 IT'S LIFE VS ZOMBIES

What we have always loved about Zombies mode in COD has been the wonderful pacing of it as you defend with all your life and then rebuild between waves. War adds competitive players to that rhythm, offering you the chance to be the attacking force or conversely, experience a much more wily opponent.



2 IT DEMANDS TEAM PLAY

Succeeding in war requires teamwork. Whether you're attacking or defending you need everyone taking up positions and performing roles that will advance you towards your objective. With no kill streaks to achieve, your only reward for good play is the ultimate success of your team.



3 IT PROVES CLASS STRENGTH

Built into the team play is the need to make use of and switch between classes as the game moves forward. Laying down smoke grenade cover and having snipers in key positions might be vital to the Allied forces in the early stages, while heavy weapons are needed for defence. And this may switch towards the end.



4 IT KEEPS EVOLVING

As each objective of the Allies is achieved, War Mode evolves into something new. Straight up assaults on positions move to king-of-the-hill scenarios, become point capture moments, become escort missions. There's real momentum to this mode, both literally across its maps and figuratively in its style of play.



5 IT FEELS CONTAINED

With a simple six versus six setup you're not going to feel overwhelmed by the task at hand, and you're not going to be a peripheral player either. Unlike similar modes in Battlefield or *Star Wars Battlefront*, you're part of a small group with a simple task and that really is engaging.

SHOULD WE BE WORRIED ABOUT SHENMUE III?

We sit down with Yu Suzuki to catch up on this RPG resurrection and consider whether this game defies contemporary criticism



Are we judging *Shenmue III* on the wrong scale? We've found ourselves asking this question rather a lot since the long-awaited, but never dared to hope, sequel was revealed at Sony's E3 conference in 2015. From the start the project seemed to divide observers into two camps; the fervently anticipating and supportive, and the sceptical and dismissive. You're either a believer in Yu Suzuki and his vision for concluding this saga or you think this whole project is a fool's errand, destined to fail.

And over the course of the last couple of years we've found ourselves bounced between these opposing views, wanting to see the potential and promise of this project, but having to apply a critical eye as objective observers of the industry. It's a challenging position, and one that's not been helped at times by what Ys Net has been putting out into the public domain as development on *Shenmue III* progresses.

The most recent example of this was the latest teaser trailer released by Ys Net at Gamescom following the announcement of a new publishing partnership with Deep Silver. This should have been a moment of unadulterated celebration, a sign that *Shenmue III*'s return is assured and stronger than ever, but what it lead to was an even clearer picture of the divided view of this game.

Objectively, the trailer was a mixed bag. The music was wonderful as ever, the animation in combat looked fantastic and seemed to have been captured really well, the environments, details and lighting all stood out as top-notch. On the other hand the non-combat animations looked a little ropey, there was zero facial animation for most of the characters and it was very hard to get a read on any potential gameplay experience. Some saw this all as further proof that this game wasn't heading in the right direction,

but you only have to spend five minutes on the dedicated Shenmue fan forums, the communities that ultimately fought tooth and nail for years to see the series continue, to realise that this trailer showed them everything they wanted to see.

And so we come to this question of whether our critical eye, – the one that we have come to apply to all modern videogames and which serves as well in critiquing the biggest triple-A or indie titles on the horizon – is finding the limits of their approach and the cracks in their ambitions. Applying this level or style of criticism of *Shenmue III* paints a pretty troubling picture of a game that had a muddled crowdfunding launch, has been less than transparent in its funding plans and appears to be slow in its progress towards completion. But we also understand that these assertions are somewhat unfair. *Shenmue III* is developing as quickly as it can and it's sensible not to rush it, as is true of any game. If we isolate the positive and negative reactions from the early clips of the game we've seen it's clear that a number of impressive features and frameworks have already been locked in and there are a few areas that are clearly unfinished. And that's the thing we're not used to; seeing a game so clearly unpolished and still in progress being shown publicly, but that really shouldn't be something to knock *Shenmue III* for doing. »

"We would never dream of challenging Suzuki's commitment or passion for this game. It is undeniable."



So far the combat in *Shenmue III* is looking pretty amazing. While it might be driven by a lot of QTE moments, the animation looks very sharp.



Any perception that *Shenmue III* is struggling isn't necessarily improved when talking to the development team as it can often lead to additional confusion. This is powered, in part, by an understandable desire by the team to play its cards close to its chest and misunderstandings can inevitably emerge through translation. It might also have something to do with a kind of generational clash between the Ys Net team's way of making games and what we're used to seeing and engaging with from modern developers. It's this disconnect that leads us to be concerned when we find out that Yu Suzuki and the Ys Net development team are confused as to why fans are so obsessed with having a forklift in the game. "There are many types of requests we've been receiving," Suzuki tells us. "For some reason, one of our top three requests is the forklift. We don't really understand."

Our initial reaction to this is to think it's a little odd if not alarming that he doesn't understand. The forklift in Shenmue may have gained fame as a kind of in-joke about the mundanity of Shenmue's job systems, but to our minds it also came to represent the strong bond between us and Ryo Hazuki as we live his life day by day, piecing together the resources and information you need to seek vengeance for his father's murder. The forklift is a symbol of Shenmue's grounded nature.

But apparently that isn't obvious to the game's makers and so we find ourselves wondering if that's a cause for concern. Does Ys Net really know what it is about Shenmue that has kept fans on the hook for so many years?

Of course, the answer has to be yes. As the latest trailer, for all its limitations, has proven what fans wanted above all else was to see Suzuki's true vision for Shenmue fulfilled. They wanted him supported to make the game the way he wanted to make it. That might even mean being given a game that's more of a throwback, perhaps even in the *Yooka-Laylee* mould, that carries over some of the shortcomings or foibles of the era, but at least resurrects a lost series. Speaking to Suzuki we get the sense that he is still singularly focused on making sure that this is *Shenmue III* as he always dreamed it would be, not a modern RPG filtered through his point of view.

"As far as Shenmue is concerned, the story was already written so that hasn't changed," he tells us when we ask about influences since the release of *Shenmue II*, released in 2001. "I constantly have this vision for Shenmue, so it only depends on the available technology and the resources and the budget to dictate what we can do. I've always been thinking that I will make it happen when I have the chance."

We would never dream of challenging Suzuki's commitment or passion for this game. It is undeniable. But this isn't him trying to make a game that will compete with the likes of Mass Effect and The Witcher, he's completing a story he likely thought he would never get to end. He's finishing his trilogy after nearly 20 years and in some ways that's more important than trying to be innovative or needing to catch up with modern gaming trends. Hardcore fans don't need that to appreciate *Shenmue III* for what it is.

What's unique about *Shenmue III* is that while its updates may be few and far between, they're genuine. You can knock, and we possibly just did, the lack of facial capture and some of the jitters in animation, but this is genuinely where the game is at right now and with no specific release date set – the December 2017 delivery date from Kickstarter seemed unlikely from the start – it doesn't need to rush itself. But because this is a game that we never thought would happen, Yu Suzuki does need to crawl out of the development cave with some footage from time to time just to reassure us all some progress is being made. That would be the bear minimum we would expect from any crowdfunded project and for Shenmue, with this game's history, it's even more important.

A massive step to securing that is the partnership with Deep Silver. We couldn't get too much detail from Suzuki on what the deal entails. "We cannot reveal how much they've funded, but it is a part of our deal and the development is getting stronger," he tells us.

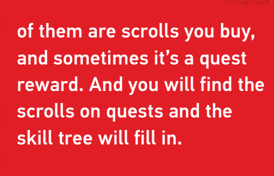
We wondered if that had changed development plans at all. "As you may know when we announced the Kickstarter project the game was scalable with stretch goals, and with this additional funding we can make it bigger and bigger." Which would seem to suggest that a number of additional stretch goals are now viable, although this may further delay development. At this moment in time we really can't put any reasonable timeframe on when *Shenmue III* is likely to arrive. It defies typical means of industry analysis.

We're so used to having games announced six months out from launch that when we get a first gameplay trailer we expect to see a polished, cinematic, action-packed, sonically-driven showcase, not a work-in-progress sizzle reel. So, if that's all we get that seems less than ideal. It might even seem shoddy and amateurish. But that's not what *Shenmue III* is. It might not be the messianic return that some would like to build it up as, it might just end up being a slightly more highly polished original Xbox release. And would that really be such a travesty? The most important thing for anyone who cares about this series is that it's undoubtedly going to be Suzuki's true vision for what this game was always supposed to be. There's not much more we can ask of a developer.

Powered by Unreal Engine 4, the environments in this game are stunning. Shenmue's sense of place and style was always a massive draw.

IN CONVERSATION WITH YU SUZUKI

We try to dig a little deeper with the Shenmue creator



It's been a couple of years since games™ last spoke with you about *Shenmue III*. Has your vision or ambition for *Shenmue III* changed at all?
As you see, *Shenmue* is becoming a reality so this is where we're up to with development. Since the beginning of the project thanks to the latest technology, the game is three times bigger than we originally thought. We have a good knowledge of the technology and how to utilise it best. Before that we didn't realise how good or bad those game engine technologies would be, but thanks to them the game is bigger than we originally sought to achieve.

Are there any gameplay elements you have successfully implemented that you can tell us about?
This has sort of been revealed, but the battle system will be incorporating what we're calling a Variable Speed Battle System. It's kind of a mixture of slow motion and quick motion mixed together.

Like the use of slow motion elements to highlight the combat?
It is incorporated with the QTE system.

Could you tell us a little about how the rapport system is developing?
We call it the Affinity system, depending on how Ryo Hazuki treats Ling Shenhua, the reaction of Ling will be changed. It will totally depend on how the player behaves. The relationship between the two characters will depend totally on the player and how they want to play.

Can the player switch to Shenhua then?
Yes you can switch. It's not for the entire game, but in some events you can switch. We call this character perspective.

Can you tell us anything about how the skill tree system works?
Basically the player is going to fill each part of the skill tree by playing longer games. On some occasions you will find scrolls and you can buy them and it's not just fighting. And you need to fill all of those skills in the tree to fill it up. Not all of them are scrolls you buy, and sometimes it's a quest reward. And you will find the scrolls on quests and the skill tree will fill in.

What has been the number one fan request for the game and how have you gone about achieving it?
The biggest request we've been hearing is that they want to know the story. It's the story they're most concerned about.

Is it hard to keep your creative vision on track when you have so many fan demands and interests to try to appease or appeal to?
Yeah, it is difficult. I need to be very selective about what I put in the game.

How big is the development team now and how does it compare to the size of team you had on the previous Shenmue games?
It is far different from the team – the structure of the team – from my previous experience in development. It's very different. In comparison with the previous game, 15 to 20 years ago, the team can be much smaller.

Many fans have now been asking for remasters of the first two Shenmue games. Is that something you would also like to see happen?
We are not in a position to answer that question. You'll have to ask Sega.

How are you approaching the pacing of this game? Will there be a lot of slower, quieter, more contemplative moments like there were before?
Yes, this will be very similar and it will be more dramatic in many ways. But there will be slower and quieter moments and then you'll have fighting and action stages and it will be up and down and more dynamic.

Have you felt tempted to modernise?
The fundamental theory is that you have to keep the game fun to play. That's the essential part and you have to judge everything else based on that perspective all of the time.

Having Deep Silver join the project as a publisher and adding some additional, unspecified funding to the game, we're a lot more confident that *Shenmue III* will see completion. It's not that we really thought it wouldn't, but this improves its chances.

HIDDEN AGENDA

A behind the scenes look into the development of one of 2017's most exciting PlayStation 4 exclusives. A multiplayer thriller brought to you by the team behind for Until Dawn that raises a difficult question: in a room full of friends driven by ulterior motives, who do you dare trust?

*Somebody in this room has a hidden agenda. The lights are dim, the tension palpable; by the time we are done here a district attorney will have had their moral compass tested by the resolve of six combative gamers. For just a handful of hours on a typically rainy Autumn day, the playroom at Supermassive Games' Guildford HQ has been transformed into a makeshift living room; the chairs twisted towards a centrepiece television that's running out a scenario that looks as if it could slot into the programming of CBS without hesitation. This has all been done in an effort to give **games™** an exclusive opportunity to sit down with the studio's latest game in a scenario that as closely resembles the fabled 'quiet Friday night in' experience as possible.*

Just moments ago we guided two police officers through a booby-trapped house. There was an arrest, a rescue and a death; a suspected serial killer is in custody, his hostage is safe, but our partner was electrocuted after a series of bad decisions. We are still arguing about this as we fast-forward five years, only to find that the killer, 'The Trapper', is protesting his innocence – just 48 hours before his planned execution. As a group, we have collectively agreed to let him argue redemption in a court of law – perhaps, it is suggested in conversation, we missed a vital piece of evidence in the previous scene. But somebody in this room has a secret, and it's our job, collectively, to work out who.

The muted hues of the mobile phone screens in our hands emanate out of the darkness around us, revealing the shifting weight, piercing stares, and deceptive tells of our group. A notification, a hidden pop-up on the devices, has informed one of the players to betray the group and push to send the killer to his execution as planned – everybody engaged in play is guilty until proven innocent now. The decision made here will send ripples out into the scenes that follow. This is a crime drama wherein we are in control of the characters, the story, and the ensuing drama. This is Hidden Agenda, a combative co-operative story, and it has the potential to change the way you enjoy your movie nights forever.



COLLABORATIVE CRIME

"Hidden Agenda is a gritty crime thriller designed to be played on your own or collaboratively with a group of friends. And your choices really, really matter. Characters in the drama will live or die by the decisions that you make," game director Will Doyle tells us. "You can play it with your friends »



NEW HORIZONS

Supermassive specialises in helping Sony understand and realise the potential of its latest technology and virtual reality is no exception. After making a splash at the launch of PSVR, delivering *Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood* and *Tumble VR*, the studio is following up with two more titles for the platform. Both are far more ambitious, demonstrating Supermassive's commitment to growth, expansion and challenging itself to deliver all new experiences.

Hidden Agenda utilises a scoring system in its competitive mode that keeps track of how you progress (and deceive your friends) throughout.

THE INPATIENT 2017

A psychological horror game set in the world of Until Dawn; *The Inpatient* takes place 60 years prior to the teenage forest massacre, at the Blackwood Sanatorium, and will hopefully give us some clue as to where the studio plans on taking the series next. Nik Bowen, Graham Reznick and Larry Fessenden return as director and writers (respectively) for this PSVR exclusive; choice and consequence makes a return, with the entire experience imbued by stunning VR visuals and the implementation of three-dimensional binaural audio.

BRAVO TEAM 2017

With PSVR and the Aim controller now readily available, there is a huge *Time Crisis*-shaped hole in our lives – that's something Supermassive is hoping to rectify here with *Bravo Team*. Designed to capture the tension and chaos of an action movie firefight, *Bravo Team* will have you trying to escape hostile territory as enemies approach from all sides. It looks fast, frantic and even better with a friend by your side; *Bravo Team* could be the first truly great PSVR shooter.

BRANCHING PATHWAYS

Hidden Agenda has been designed as game that can be played over and over again with your friends, with the experience changing each time. To facilitate this, Supermassive has had to build it with multiple branching pathways, ensuring that each way through the story and its scenarios makes sense within the wider context of the game. That process, we're told, can cause quite a few headaches.

"There is a *lot* of iteration," game director Will Doyle tells us, a tired smile creeping across his face. "When we design these games we have a sort of big chart of narrative points that we want to hit in the story, so we always know were it's heading – it's always important to know what the end is and that rolls back into every single scene or level. A good place to start is at the end and you can work back from that."

"At a basic level, our writing process is very similar to a lot of level design processes; we get together, we have a whiteboard, we get a lot of post-its and slap up all of the ideas that we have… and then we try to draw a path through it."

Doyle tells us that working on *Until Dawn*, a game that also featured a variety of different narrative options – without ever hitting a hard fail state – helped the studio refine its process, for example it now uses internal software to help prototype the narrative paths. But that, as senior producer Jez Harris counters, doesn't mean there aren't any friction points. "The biggest risk that we have with this is when you come to editing later on. Suddenly you may realise that perhaps something isn't sitting right, and you try to take one little piece out of the puzzle and realise the damage that can cause," Harris reveals, and it, to be perfectly honest, doesn't sound like a particularly fun process – even after a heavy iteration process that proceeds it all. "It can be a disaster. When somebody suggests, 'oh we can just cut that' it's like, 'ahah no, no, no; we can't *just* cut that!' because the implications are potentially massive. We have to be meticulous with it. The flow of every possible route through needs to feel, not only feel like it was the right version of the story, but that it was *your* version of the story."

"One of the things we are quite happy with when it comes to Hidden Agenda," adds Doyle, "is that you will see completely different scenes throughout the game that may or may not show up [depending on your decisions]. We have to ensure that logic and the *feel* of it works coming from Point A and going to Point Y."





Felicity Graves is the other character you will follow in *Hidden Agenda*. You'll meet Graves as a lawyer during the initial prosecution of The Trapper, although you'll encounter her again as the District Attorney. Her motivations in the game are dictated by the law she swore to uphold.

Hidden Agenda is centred on the character of Becky Marnie. You'll be introduced to her as a beat cop, although she will later progress to a homicide detective for her work on this case; in the opening chapter your initial interactions with serial killer The Trapper will help dictate her career progression.

and just enjoy the story if you want to, but in competitive mode you've got the added twist of one of you being up to something in every scene. So far, we've seen that it seems to be working pretty well."

Looking at *Hidden Agenda* broadly, before we had the opportunity to get our hands on it for ourselves, it sounded like an ambitious project with an impossible goal. A subversion of the *Heavy Rain* format, a narrative-driven, cinematic experience with an ever-shifting story – albeit one that can be derailed by your friends with the flick of a finger. Senior producer Jez Harris explained that one of the things Supermassive wanted to do from the outset of this project, two years in development as you read this, "was to make a competitive multiplayer narrative game" that is "all about pushing the fun into the room; about two to six mates sat around at home playing through a story together." He immediately took note of our scepticism with a smile. He knew then what we hadn't yet discovered, that by the time we walked out of Supermassive's HQ we would be completely sold on the concept and desperate to play more.

You know as well as we do that narrative-driven adventures and competitive multiplayer experiences are seemingly at odds with one another at a very basic, intrinsic level. But this isn't a combination that Supermassive has pulled together out of thin air. The studio has been active in the industry since 2008, but it erupted in exposure and popularity with the release of 2015's *Until Dawn*. It took the framework of the Slasher genre and merged it to great effect with the interactive form. Who lived and who died out of a group of wantaway teens was in your hands. *Until Dawn* was a resounding success, a bold single-player game that showed there was still life in the triple-A space for solo story experiences. It was, however, the way in which the community turned *Until Dawn* into a co-operative experience that really surprised the studio – and it has poured everything into supporting that vision for itself with its new game.

> **"We really didn't expect it to kick off on the streaming side as much as it did."**
> **WILL DOYLE, GAME DIRECTOR**

"It was an amazing thing to see with *Until Dawn*. We really didn't expect it to kick off on the streaming side as much as it did," admits Doyle, noting that the experience really changed the studio's approach to development. They weren't just watching as curious fans, tuning in to Twitch and YouTube to view the chaos the community had created for itself, but creators having their eyes widened to a whole new type of play experience. "To see whole groups of people sitting around and taking on different character roles, or shouting out directions, or passing the controller around amongst themselves… it was a real revelation for us. I think it has informed the whole studio. We are looking at, in the future, ways that we can integrate this even more."

"The moment we heard about PlayLink," Doyle continues, "we were buzzing with ideas as to how we could use it for a storytelling game. From receiving the news about PlayLink [to] looking at what had happened with *Until Dawn*, we immediately thought a crime thriller suited it well. Because, in a crime story, everybody has got their own motive. Everybody is always up to something. It just fit really, really well… that was basically our pitch to Sony."

Unsurprisingly, Sony loved it and Supermassive immediately began planning and prototyping. PlayLink was quietly revealed during E3 2017, but its application in the gaming space has the potential to have a long-lasting impact. It works by asking every player to put down their controllers and pick up their phones – designed to bring party games with minimal fuss to the PS4. *Hidden Agenda* is no mere party game though; it's a mature crime thriller that looks to integrate the technology with play in a way that we've never quite experienced before, designed to entice the 'core' audience while still offering something that a more mainstream audience can appreciate and get behind. For Supermassive, being on the forefront of an initiative like this is what it lives for.

"Supermassive has a history of working with new ideas. Back at the start it was the Move controller and now we are doing work with PlayLink and PSVR," says Harris, keen to note that the studio currently has two other revealed works in active development, *The Inpatient* and *Bravo Team* for PSVR. "We are fairly accustomed to doing that stuff and Sony, particularly, kind of respects us for that and comes to us early on to get us involved because they know we can do stuff with it. It's been an exciting one; such a good fit and a good idea."

"The PlayLink initiative lets us use your mobile device in some interesting ways," Doyle affirms, noting that the studio has really tried to create something that would be very difficult to replicate with a traditional setup. "These include letting you receive hidden objectives and secret information. It also gives you the option to compete against »





Above *Hidden Agenda* follows the case of a serial killer, named The Trapper, who is known for murdering people and then setting traps at the scene of the crime for the first responders. While much of the story is under wraps, it is understood that it will delve into the mysteries surrounding his capture and arrest.

your friends all as you work your way through the story together."

Hidden Agenda is then, essentially, an interactive movie. That's something the studio isn't shy of admitting. "[We're making] no secret of the fact that we are trying to create something that is a replacement for a movie night. Two to three hours is a [standard] playthrough – subject to how long the arguments are," Harris laughs, and we can certainly see a typical game dominating your evening's entertainment.

You see, no single person has direct control of the action, moving through scenes is a collaborative effort while the game will occasionally pause to allow the group to make – or argue, as is more often the case – a decision, inputted with screen swipes and presses. These actions can vary from the relatively mundane – split up or stay together when storming a house as a cop duo; to the far more impactful – save a hostage or your impaired partner; and the consequences of each action ripple out into the rest of the story. If the vote is split between the group somebody will have to switch sides to progress… or aggressively take control of the scene entirely, revealing your true intentions in the process, and this is where much of the conflict stems from.

Thankfully, intuitive controls ensure that all actions are easy to perform, making this story fit for all the family. *Until Dawn* would often play with innovative uses of the Dual Shock controller, it made for fantastic moments but could barely be considered fun for all. This was something Supermassive was conscious of throughout development of *Hidden Agenda*. "We iterated a lot to get controls that were really, really simple – that anybody could use. Our game is really just swipes; we even avoided pinches, we had to play around with a lot of different stuff to get to where we are now," says Doyle, adding, "their function, as a way of giving you information, is really handy. We've got this big thing where you don't want to show your mates what's down here [on the screen of the device you're using] and you obviously couldn't do that on a controller; straight away, it just made sense to us."

"I think it's interesting, because we've seen that even though our mechanics are really very simple, there are potentially a lot of tactics that can develop once you begin to think through the different ways you can behave," Harris continues. "It creates a lot of interesting scenarios, it's about creating an experience that you can play again and again with your friends and have a different thing each time."

Have you ever watched a thriller or a horror movie and found yourself literally screaming at your TV? Demanding that the characters don't split up, go into a basement or approach an armed suspect alone? *Hidden Agenda* is essentially that experience over and over again. It's a game that works to capitalise on natural conflict points. It's immediately immersive too; the characters are well acted, the visuals are gorgeous and the writing sharp, it doesn't take long to get dragged into a story so heavily inspired by the likes of *Se7en* and *The Silence Of The Lambs*, as well as by neo-noir stories from the Fifties through a modern lens.

Supermassive has a natural talent for leveraging tropes of a genre to build unique feeling videogames. *Hidden Agenda* works so successfully, we suspect, because much like *Until Dawn* it is impossible to play it wrong. You are simply playing through *your* version of the story every time. "In *Until Dawn* you can't fail, and I think that's one of the things that made that game special," Doyle considers, explaining how this informed the *Hidden Agenda* team. "There are no checkpoints, there is no going back and redoing it, it just moves on and it saves. You have to live with your decisions. And that reassured us that what we were doing with *Hidden Agenda* was a good thing. The story can twist how you like it, guided by the Hidden Agendas, without it pushing you into a fail state."

> "It's no secret that we are trying to create something that is a replacement for a movie night."
> **JEZ HARRIS, SENIOR PRODUCER**

It's these Hidden Agendas that really drive play, making this experience feel uniquely 'Supermassive'. At the beginning of each scene every player is granted Takeover cards, used to assert dominance over a particular decision or situation. Playing one doesn't necessarily guarantee that it will play out the way you wanted, though – the cards stack, meaning another player can play one of their own and assert control away from you. It's here where PlayLink brings a new dynamic to play. In every scene the game assigns a secret objective, a Hidden Agenda, to one player in the room – then it's time to hide your phone screen from the group and try to figure out who is misleading the group at large.

Simply playing a Takeover card in this situation would reveal your hand, and if other players can figure out who it is with the agenda you are going to sacrifice a lot of points in competitive play, every action scored and taken into account throughout the game to crown an eventual winner. Instead, the best route to success is casual manipulation. Guiding your friends into making different decisions, or pairing them off against one another, is the key route to getting your way in a scene. It's a fascinating social experiment, and a smart way to follow and mould a story in motion.

"The Hidden Agendas are definitely conflict based. Throughout the game it is back-to-back hidden agendas when you play. The story can be pulled in one way or the other and it's those moments that we choose for Hidden Agendas. But they do vary, and some will absolutely ask you to get someone killed – and you might not want them to die," laughs Doyle, with him and Harris noting that you can avoid completing your Hidden Agenda task entirely if you'd rather see a particular character live to fight another day. "They are all dilemmas. Dilemmas are really what Supermassive does in its games; we are always trying to figure out what are these impossible choices that you can make."

Hidden Agenda is an extension of what Supermassive does best. It's a simple experience, but it's one that ultimately benefits from the people in the room with you. The ever-shifting structure of play, the nature of the evolving story and the inherent deception of the secret objectives ensures that it's a game that offers something new every time that you approach it. *Hidden Agenda* is the result of the community running wild with *Until Dawn*, and we can't wait to see what comes after you get your hands on this.



Supermassive was inspired by watching the ways in which the community evolved *Until Dawn*, a single-player experience, into a co-operative driven narrative experiment. It's been fun to see for everybody involved.





JEZ HARRIS, SENIOR PRODUCER



WILL DOYLE, GAME DIRECTOR

GAMES AS AN ***EXPERIENCE,*** *NOT AS A* ***CHALLENGE***

Getting to the heart of the PlayLink experience, Sony's mobile device experiment designed to increase accessibility and fun for the whole family

You plan for *Hidden Agenda* to essentially replace movie night with the family. What does PlayLink bring to the party that an ordinary controller doesn't?

WILL DOYLE: Everybody has a mobile phone. It gets around a complication of having to have so many controllers. We can allow up to six players to get together and just play, all using their own mobile phones.

JEZ HARRIS: Crucially, it's a little more accessible as well than, you know, giving your mum or dad a DualShock and them not necessarily knowing what to do with it. But a mobile phone is pretty straightforward, right? Although *Hidden Agenda* is not a profoundly family-friendly game, it is a 16+, but… it's not about gamers necessarily, it's about getting a group of people together – a replacement for a movie night. People just want to be told a good story, they want to engage with a good story, and this is what this does.

Do you believe that *Hidden Agenda* can bring more people into games?

WILL: I hope that it gets more people playing games, [particularly] people that wouldn't normally do. Games get bigger and bigger every year, but there is still a barrier where some people won't come and play them. I really hope that, at the end of this, people who have never played games before will look at it in action and will be able to just pick it up and go through it.

JEZ: And that's not just down to the mobile phone side of things either. While that does take down a massive barrier straight away, and I think that is going to help, but then again it's also the story. We are telling a story that is more akin to something that you'll watch on Netflix or the BBC, or whatever it might be. It's not a story about shooting things and blowing stuff up, it's a relatively mature, interesting crime thriller that should just inherently have a broader appeal that a typical videogame story.

For the last decade the industry has really latched on to using difficulty to define large parts of its identity, are we seeing a shift away from that?

WILL: I think that's definitely been happening for a while. It's games as experiences, instead of standard game theory challenges. In Supermassive it's definitely something that we've thought about before; in *Until Dawn*, you could play through it and it didn't matter if you died, you still had a well-rounded experience. But, on the flip side, there is always a place for the other [type of experience]. The potential audience has certainly broadened, but there will always be the hardcore – and we are better for it.

JEZ: And neither market is diminished by the existence of the other, that's the main thing. I think it just means more people are playing games, so you need more things to appeal to more tastes. That's awesome for us! I think we are playing a big part in it with this stuff, and Sony with PlayLink, full stop. They have obviously done it before at various points in PlayStation lifecycles with *Buzz*, *SingStar* and whatever else that has come before; they always recognise that there is a time where they can make it go bigger and it's great to be involved in because it's important.





ONE OF A KIND

THE MARIO MAKERS ARE ON A NEVER-ENDING QUEST FOR ORIGINALITY AND THEY MAY HAVE JUST FOUND THE ULTIMATE INCARNATION OF THAT IDEAL WITH **SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY**. WE SIT DOWN WITH PRODUCER **YOSHIAKI KOIZUMI** FOR THE FULL STORY BEHIND THE GAME



"THIS MIGHT ACTUALLY BE SURPRISING TO HEAR, BUT EVERY TIME THAT WE CREATE A NEW MARIO GAME WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING AT SOMETHING NEW AND A NEW IDEA THAT WE CAN START FROM," *Super Mario Odyssey* producer Yoshiaki Koizumi reveals to us, and he's half right. You see it sort of does and doesn't come as a surprise that this would be the case. On the one hand Mario is just Mario; on a surface level he's always the same and we kind of love that about him. Mario hasn't needed to evolve very much to remain vital and popular. On the other hand, Mario has never stopped evolving; every game seems to send him in a new direction whether that's his growth as a 2D platforming character moving from throwing fire to flying through the air or the transition through 3D incarnations from *Super Mario 64*'s sandbox to the water mechanics of *Sunshine* or the world-hopping of *Galaxy*. The Super Mario series has never stood still, while Mario has held firm as its lynchpin.

"Of course, with Mario, there are some things that you shouldn't change and there's a spirit of a Mario game that we have to stay with, but actually beyond that every time that we create a new Mario game we're looking for new ideas and new adventures and new kinds of action that we can add to the game," continues Koizumi. "In previous Mario games he's gone out into space, he's gone on holiday, and in this game he even visits a city that is vaguely reminiscent of New York. So, depending on where he goes he will have new adventures and I think there's a lot of new surprises to be had based on putting Mario in those different situations." »



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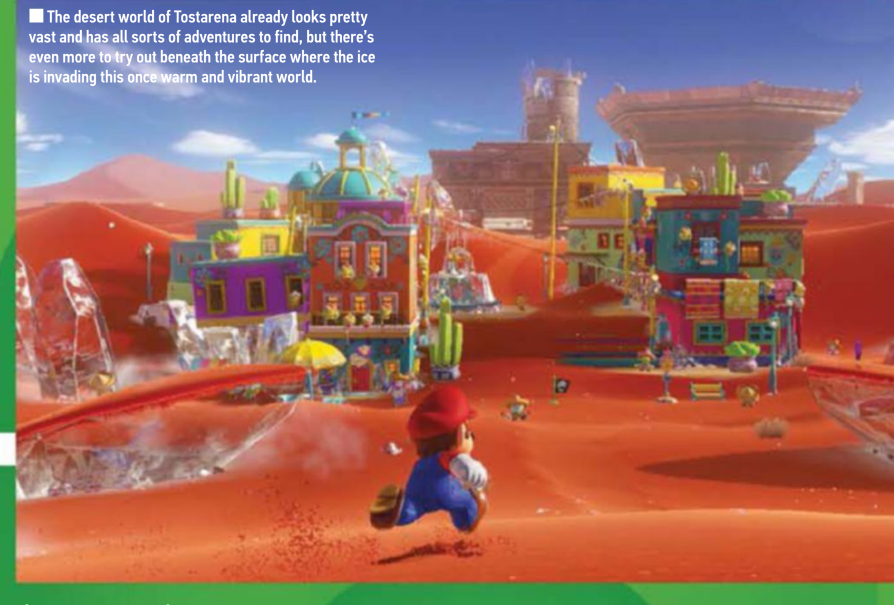
Koizumi has been heavily involved in the growth and evolution of this series for over 20 years having made his way up at Nintendo starting as an artist (he's credited with art on the manual for *A Link To The Past*), as a script writer among other roles on *Link's Awakening*, and eventually assistant director on *Super Mario 64*. Since then he's worked on all of Mario's 3D adventures, including as director on *Super Mario Sunshine* and *Super Mario Galaxy*. And in many respects *Super Mario Odyssey* feels like a throwback to that classic 3D design of Mario before the Wii era.

"Firstly I would say that when I start a new project, I'm not consciously looking back on past projects and trying to take references or ideas from those games," Koizumi tell us. "But, of course, when we're





> THIS TIME MANY OF THOSE ELEMENTS DIDN'T REALLY FEEL LIKE THEY WOULD FIT INTO THE MUSHROOM KINGDOM **YOSHIAKI KOIZUMI, PRODUCER**



The desert world of Tostarena already looks pretty vast and has all sorts of adventures to find, but there's even more to try out beneath the surface where the ice is invading this once warm and vibrant world.

FASHION ICON

ODYSSEY PAYS HOMAGE TO MARIO'S STORIED PAST

Mario is best known in his classic dungarees and cap look, but he's donned more than a few costumes over the years and *Odyssey* is resurrecting a bunch of them as it sends the Nintendo mascot to strange new worlds.



BUILDER

The most recent homage is to *Super Mario Maker* from the Wii U and 3DS. As well as being used in all of the game's promotional art, you could unlock this outfit for Mario by completing the Knat Attack game during world creation, itself a nod to *Mario Paint*. It was a great little Easter egg.



AMERICAN FOOTBALLER

We've not seen this one in action yet, but the images that have been shared around of Mario in full NFL attire make him look a lot like the Chargin' Chuck enemies, first seen in *Super Mario World*. We imagine this gives Mario a lot of extra protection to tackle Goombas without fear.



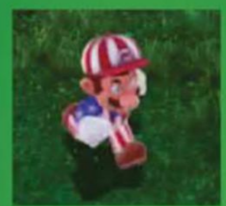
PONCHO

The ideal outfit for wearing in Tostarena, a world that mixes Mexico and Egypt together into a rather colourful desert world – albeit one that's freezing thanks to ice breaking through the ground. This poncho number is inspired by a similar outfit worn by Mario in *Qix* on the Game Boy.



EXPLORER

This one seems rather apt for the tone and structure of *Super Mario Odyssey* as Mario is tasked with travelling from world to world, exploring every nook and cranny he can find. The outfit however first made its appearance as Mario attire in *Picross 2*, another great Game Boy puzzle game.



GOLFER

Mario's sporting career goes back many years and his appearances in titles like *NES Open Tournament Golf*, from which this rather spangly red, white and blue number was taken and translated into a costume for *Odyssey*. We're not sure this is strictly regulation attire, but we'll be interested to see what bonus effects it offers.



CHEF

With the ability to unlock new missions in *Odyssey*'s Luncheon Kingdom, this chef outfit will be a high priority to unlock when you first visit that world. It also happens to be a reference to one of Mario's lesser-remembered appearances in *Yoshi's Cookie*, a fun tile-matching puzzle game.



creating a new game we think about – for this generation of fans the current generation of customers – what will be fun, what will be exciting and surprising for them? And in that respect it can help to think about past games and think about things that people really liked and whether those things can be brought into this game or whether maybe they need to be changed or updated for a new game. For this new game in particular I definitely feel like my experiences working on *Super Mario 64* and *Super Mario Sunshine* were important and that experience definitely helped me when I was working on *Super Mario Odyssey*."

That most likely stems from the pure sandbox style that *Odyssey* is embracing and which was at the heart of these previous 3D titles. *Super Mario 64* in particular was said to have been designed so that you could spend hours in its opening castle hub world simply jumping around and enjoying the room to roam you were afforded by a hub level with no enemies in your way. While the stages revealed for *Mario Odyssey* thus far have no shortage of foes to face there is still that very strong sense of openness and an invitation to experiment. Pretty much every leap and jump Mario has ever been capable of in a game has been included in this release and chaining them together, with the help of Cappy, is a real possibility that opens up amazing new avenues.

"The very first thing we think about when creating a Mario game is that for the player, for the person controlling Mario, what kind of moves and actions will be fun?" Koizumi explains. "We were thinking about lots of different new moves and new actions for Mario. Our regular way of working was thinking about the new actions first and the new moves, and then thinking about gameplay scenarios that would challenge the player to use those moves and then placing those scenarios into the levels and into the kingdoms. But one thing that was quite new this time is, for example, the city, the Metro kingdom – it did actually come from thinking about the idea for the kingdom first. That's the kind of environment we would like to see Mario play around in and then for that kingdom we started from there. And that was kind of the other way around to how we normally do it. Jumping from building to building, or jumping down from a building, that's the kind of thing that we thought would be fun to try with Mario."

And so it is that New Donk City came to be; a very different location for Mario to explore compared to what we're used to seeing from his native Mushroom Kingdom or Delfino Isle. Quite apart from its inhabitants being far more realistically proportioned than might be typical from this series, it's a tightly compacted, highly vertical location that offers some high-flying acrobatic playgrounds for Mario as well as some opportunities to drive around and enjoy the entertainment this metropolis has to offer.

"This time many of those elements didn't really feel like they would fit into the Mushroom Kingdom, so we had to start thinking about, 'well, what kind of new environment would they fit into?'," we find out from Koizumi as we discuss the inception of New Donk City. "And then another key theme of this game is surprise. Actually taking Mario out of that familiar Mushroom Kingdom setting and taking him to new places, the kind of places you wouldn't normally see him in, we really thought that was a way of surprising and hopefully delighting players."

> "WE ENCOURAGE THE TEAM MEMBERS TO THINK FREELY ABOUT WHAT IDEAS MIGHT BE FUN AND WHAT GAME MECHANICS MIGHT BE FUN"
> **YOSHIAKI KOIZUMI, PRODUCER**

What has delighted us more than anything else thus far though has been the game's new Capture mechanic and the additional gameplay opportunities it presents. As we began by saying, in many respects innovations as well as iteration are at the heart of what Mario games have traditionally been about and in this respect *Odyssey* appears to be holding true to the legacy. In fact, as we find out from Koizumi, the introduction of the Cappy and the ability to inhabit and mimic the abilities of characters and objects in the game presented the newer challenge of containing and focusing their efforts.

"In this game Mario has the Capture ability, which is a new ability that lets him capture enemies and kind of take on some of their characteristics," he explains. "Now, that firstly is something new and that was one of our first ideas, so like I mentioned, when we make a new Mario game we think of new ideas and we start from a point of experimenting with those new ideas. So, actually the most difficult, the most challenging thing, is when we start with all these different ideas, all of these different experiments or prototypes, and we might have tens of different ideas for new mechanics we can introduce, the most difficult and challenging thing is narrowing that down to the one new idea that is the most enjoyable. And if players who play the game will play it and think 'yeah, this new idea really is a lot of fun', then we'll be happy and we'll feel like we've done our job well."

Every world we've been introduced to in *Odyssey* appears to be built around the core intention to keep you experimenting and experiencing new mechanics.

■ New Donk City is apparently an unusual example of a Mario level for many reasons, but most notably for the development team it's because they came up with the idea for the world first, not the mechanics first as they would normally do.



■ Being able to possess objects, such as this tank, opens up so many new gameplay opportunities for the Mario team that would never have been obvious or easy to achieve before. Cappy is a real game changer.



So, on top of being able to play around with Mario's base abilities of leaping and spinning about the place, you can also look around and think about how the Capture ability might play into your plans. In New Donk City that involves leaping into power lines, taking control of taxis or diving into a civilian controlling a small remote control car. Meanwhile in Tostarena, the Día de Muertos meets Egypt desert world you can ride around on stone lions or possess a cactus. Another example we've really enjoyed is the Uproots from Steam Gardens, the game's dense Wooded Kingdom. An Uproot is a new kind of enemy, at first not immediately distinguishable from a Goomba wearing a flowerpot on its head, but then it extends its legs and does a little front flip towards you as an attack.

Knocking off the flowerpot from its head and then following up with another Cappy attack will allow you to Capture the Uproot and begin waddling around as one of these creatures. The way in which this enemy's unique vantage point changes the way you look at and interact with the world around you is indicative of the way in which playing around and thinking about the gameplay possibilities at your fingertips can lead you in all sorts of new directions and reveal new secrets in the game (and Nintendo has packed secrets in everywhere). So, with this Uproot we can now collect some purple coins in the tree line that we didn't even realise were there or lift up platforms that would otherwise have been stuck and useless to us.

> EVERYONE LIKES BEING ABLE TO BUY SOMETHING SPECIAL, TO TRAVEL TO A PLACE AND BUY SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN ONLY BUY IN THAT PLACE
> **YOSHIAKI KOIZUMI, PRODUCER**

There are just so many new ways of interacting and playing that the Capture mechanic opens up to you, we had to wonder how the development team managed to come up with and sort them all out. "We very much work as a team when it comes to things like this and it's not as if just the director or just the planning director who comes up with ideas on his own," Koizumi insists. "The whole team come up with ideas and bounce ideas off each other and then from that we kind of choose ones that the director thinks will actually work in-game. And because we encourage the team members to think freely about what ideas might be fun and what game mechanics might be fun, it's not easy, but it's possible to get lots of ideas that would work well within a Mario setting. Starting from that point of 'if it's fun, let's try it', that's the kind of attitude we take at first and then it's the director's responsibility to select the ideas and actually link them together into a cohesive game. That's probably the most difficult part of the process."

Every creature you capture has their own unique abilities and their own animation style too. The Hammer Bros. hop around everywhere, offering a unique control challenge in areas where precision is essential. Playing as a Bullet Bill gives you full lateral control of your movement and speed, which should power you over large gaps of chasms, but it doesn't appear to give you any vertical control. Being a surge of electricity on a power line largely confines you to that single stretch of cable, although we've seen you can momentarily leap from the line to grab coins. The attention to detail and the unique feeling you get from every Capture target is just another thing for you to seek out and discover as you keep pushing and testing this sandbox for yourself.

Of course the Capture scenario we all got a little too excited about – or maybe not excited about enough? – was the revelation that Mario could become a T-Rex. We had to ask Koizumi who came up with the idea, and, perhaps more importantly, whether or not they had been promoted yet. "Well, like I said, the whole team comes up with lots and lots ideas for a new game, so to be honest with you I can't remember specifically which individual first had the idea of the T-Rex, but actually sorting through all of those ideas and fashioning them into a cohesive game really was the main responsibility of the director [Kenta Motokura], so I have to give him a lot of credit," he tells us. Perhaps no promotion for him just yet then, with this being his second directorial role after *Super Mario 3D World*.

But like a televised shopping channel trying to shill a super-sharp knife set, there's more. As if the widest selection of Mario moves combined with open worlds to explore and the ability to mimic characters in the game through the Capture mechanic wasn't enough, there's a whole sub-system of costumes built into the series' classic coin collecting. This is straight out of sandbox game-design 101 of course, but it also means that one of the staples of Mario gaming, collecting every coin you can in any given level, has a new incentive behind it.

"Just at the very start, we had this idea that we wanted coins to not just be a way of keeping score, but to be actually something that you could make use of in the game," Koizumi tells us. "And if, for example, there is a way that you can spend coins and buy items in-game, we thought that would also add motivation to collect them in the first place. As the main theme of this game is travel, we also had the idea of what are called regional coins, which are coins that you collect in the different kingdoms and can only be used in those kingdoms. So by introducing these we also thought it would give players more motivation to visit the different kingdoms and sometimes maybe even return to a kingdom that they had previously visited. Because everyone likes being able to buy something *special*, to travel to a place and buy something that you can only buy in that place."

Going back into worlds to find every last coin and every last star or moon has been one of our greatest passions since the *Super Mario 64* days. It's the part of playing 3D Mario



■ The Luncheon Kingdom is possibly the most colourful Mario stage ever made and stands out even more in this game thanks to its heavily polygonal object design. We're expecting a bunch of Super Mario Bros. 2 references here too.



Seeing Mario walk around New Donk City is pretty strange, but certainly not as strange as him possessing a taxicab or jumping on the rooftops of cars while riding a scooter, which is also possible here.

CAPPY CO-OP

A LIGHT WAY TO PLAY WITH FRIENDS

A fun twist on *Super Mario Odyssey* that makes good use of the Nintendo Switch hardware is playing co-op. Two players can have a Joy-Con each with one looking after Mario and the second player controlling Cappy independently. This gives you a lot more fine control over Cappy's movements in the game, but the camera will stick closely with Mario since he's the one who is needed to complete objectives.

With the reduced button inputs of a single Joy-Con you can control movement, but it takes an additional button press to switch your single analogue stick to camera control. Since the camera movement in the game is pretty solid already that shouldn't put you at too much of a disadvantage, but if you should need to adjust your view you can at least rely on your Cappy partner to protect you. Since Cappy is essentially invincible, they'll have no trouble clearing a path for you when you need it.

We had wondered how *Odyssey* might tackle multiplayer since the Switch seems so well suited to bringing players into the Mario world and this appears to be an interesting take on a co-op experience. Whether it might wear a little thin over time if there's a disparity in experience between players is up for debate.


METRO
EXODUS



LONG ROAD TO RUIN

4A GAMES IS READY TO CHALLENGE THE BIGGEST STUDIOS IN THE WORLD WITH METRO EXODUS. UNQUESTIONABLY ITS BIGGEST AND MOST AMBITIOUS TITLE TO DATE, WE DELVE BEHIND THE SCENES TO GET AN IDEA OF THE PASSION AND DRIVE FUELLING THIS TRULY NEXT-GENERATION SHOOTER

The time to abandon the taunting tunnels of the Metro system has finally arrived. Artyom has found himself on a long road to nowhere, seeking safety in the unknown that lies ahead. Accompanied by a small band of survivors – all that remains of the infamous Spartan Rangers – Artyom is leaving the scorched ruins of Moscow behind him; heading east in search of clean air, a cool breeze, and a distinct lack of paranormal activity. But as this group will soon discover, surfacing for air can be just as deadly as taking your chances in the suffocating embrace of the shadows. For Artyom, for the Rangers, and for the studio behind it all, *Metro Exodus* represents something of a bold new beginning.

"Artyom has always been fascinated with exploring outside of his underground world," suggests Jon Bloch, executive producer at 4A Games. Up until now, that has been a fascination wrought with ruin; the tunnels of the infamous Metro system are all Artyom has even known, and any attempts made to explore above ground in *Metro 2033* and its sequel, *Metro: Last Light*, have too often been undercut with tragedy. But this time, we're assured, it's to be a risk worth taking. "In *Metro Exodus* Artyom will make a discovery that will give him an opportunity that he's always wanted: to see what is out there, beyond the limits of the Moscow Metro system."

Funnily enough, 4A has always wanted to explore beyond the limits of the Metro system too. The studio is comprised of key members of a long-defunct development team, that of GSC Game World – the creative entity behind *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*. It represented a fusion of traditional first-person shooter sensibilities and deeply integrated RPG systems; an engrossing non-linear story cast out across sprawling sandbox areas, full of side-quests and distractions aplenty – it was a light in the dark for PC gaming in 2007, and is fast becoming a forgotten relic to a different era of first-person shooters.

When 4A formed in 2006, led by lead *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* designer (and Metro's creative director) Andriy 'Prof' Prokhorov, many had hoped that the personnel would continue on in a similar vein – keeping the RPG-shooter hybrid flame burning bright into the next generation. 'Hoped', that is, before the studio got a hold of the Metro license and turned its attention to building an experience that could fulfil author Dmitry Glukhovsky's vision. Internal ambitions to expand on past successes had to take a backseat to reality. 4A was a small development outfit by any standards, punching above its weight with limited resources and time. *Metro 2033* [2010] and *Metro: Last Light* [2013] were linear by design, tight stories built to heighten tension and relieve the pressure through thunderous set pieces. The inherent limitations to the Metro design ensured that the team was forced to channel its creativity and passion – its expertise in defying expectations – into other areas. Into evolving its ever-impressive development tools and proprietary engine, into delivering an experience that would push back against the litany of shooters ignoring single-player sensibilities for some of that evergreen multiplayer money, and, perhaps most importantly, ensuring that its resolve was absolute. Budget, time and size be damned: 4A wanted the Metro games to look and play unlike anything else on the market.

> "METRO EXODUS HAS BEEN IN DEVELOPMENT FOR THREE YEARS. IT REPRESENTS OUR MOST AMBITIOUS PROJECT YET"
> **ANDRIY PROKHOROV,**
> CREATIVE DIRECTOR

With *Metro Exodus*, 4A has something far bigger planned. The studio has expanded from its Ukrainian base of operations and opened a second office in Malta, taking its overall size to over 140 employees. It is veering from the path of the books, offering an untold chapter in Artyom's journey for salvation. And, perhaps most importantly, 4A Games is more confident than ever in its ability to interweave narrative and gameplay; eager to make impressive technical leaps with the Xbox One X and PS4 Pro hardware at its disposal, and defiant in its determination to be considered a triple-A studio.

4A is finally ready to deliver the spiritual successor to *Shadow Of Chernobyl* that we've long suspected it is capable of. But, as the team was quick to discover, passion and drive can only take you so far in this industry – some tasks are easier said than done. "We are so proud to finally be able to reveal our next Metro game to the world," says Andriy Prokhorov, creative director and co-founder of 4A Games. "I would like to thank all the Metro fans for their patience; *Metro Exodus* has been in development for three years between our »

Malta and Kyiv studios. It represents our most ambitious project yet."

Bloch is quick to echo the sentiments of Prokhorov, and will be the first to admit that it has taken some amount of time and effort for the pieces to fall into place with *Exodus*. Neither of them are wrong either: this is without question 4A Games' most ambitious project to date, a somewhat startling statement of intent for the modestly sized studio. "At the beginning of *Metro Exodus*' development, we thought we would be able to easily take our experience with large sandbox levels from those *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* days and meld it with our experience making linear story-driven content from the Metro games," Bloch admits, honest about the struggles 4A has faced in confronting its own ambition. "Things didn't fit together so easily; the scope was hard to realise. It took us nearly two years of iterating before we got the formula right… before we were able to play something we thought really realised this dream."

Bloch considers *Exodus* a Metro game first, as it rightfully should be, albeit one imbued with the spirit of *Shadow Of Chernobyl* – technical innovation, expanded gameplay, and a wider scope at its heart. That is to say then, this is still the Metro experience that you've come to love, just not one as you've ever seen it before: "*Exodus* is definitely a blend of our experience on both series. That was the goal when we set out to make this game," he says, although he is quick to re-clarify the distinction between the two. "You could consider parts of *Exodus* to be a spiritual successor to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, but the game as a whole is something different because it's still a Metro game at its core. Think of it more like Metro with *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* bits mixed in."

Bloch is, quite clearly, treading carefully. The Metro games have a very particular flavour to them; claustrophobic crawls through dank tunnels that put you face to face with the worst of humanity, a bleak insight into a world wrought with the burden of nuclear fallout. There's a sewer-dwelling Fourth Reich contingency and the perilous decay of a poison atmosphere to consider; mutated monstrosities that stalk the shadows and paranormal entities disrupting the senses to contend with too. There is a distinct style to the Metro games that we'd be disappointed to see sacrificed at the altar of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and there is of course some trepidation out there in the gaming community that heading out of the underground, leaping onto a train, and taking a cross-continental tour of the Russian wastelands could damage those core sensibilities. Thankfully, it's a feeling the studio shares with its fans. 4A wants to do *Exodus* right, or it doesn't want to do it at all.

"We wanted to make sure that we could introduce all of these new mechanics and parameters without having to remove the things that people loved from the previous Metro games. Finding that balance turned out to be harder than we thought," admits Bloch, noting that striving to strike a balance between linear storytelling and open spaces has been a key priority for 4A since *Exodus* entered development in 2014. "In the past we've done a few larger, less linear, levels that took place above the surface, but the larger open levels in *Metro Exodus* dwarf those by comparison." That's an impressive accomplishment; when 4A imposed *Last Light*'s impressive Echoes map over one of *Exodus*' spaces it was swallowed by the new, almost 10km squared space. Subterranean excursions meet sprawling survival sandboxes in *Exodus*, a balance few shooters have been able to pull off successfully.

"We're trying to create a game that, at its core, has a linear story that the player can experience the same way as in the previous Metro games. At the same time, we're trying to introduce a lot more freedom to explore and allow players the chance to set their own pace in certain areas. Being both linear and open at the same time sounds contradictory but we've found a balance between the two that we think provides a great experience that players will really like."

Exodus is built around the same key metrics as the Metro games that have come before it – combat, survival and exploration. Only now you get to do more of each.





■ *Exodus* will span an entire year, with the game shifting between seasons as you travel the country aboard the Aurora, a heavily modified steam locomotive that Artyom stumbled across.



■ *Exodus* will be the first game to feature dynamic weather and a reactive day/night cycle, built to help enhance the new huge, non-linear levels. These new systems will change the way you explore, survive and thrive as you leave Moscow behind.

■ *Exodus* will still feature the classic Metro gameplay that you are familiar with, only now it'll be joined with non-linear levels echoing the spaces that were last seen in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*.

■ *Metro Exodus* will be set after the Redemption ending of *Last Light*, and choices made throughout will once again alter how the game progresses. Your choices will even determine the fate of your comrades aboard the Aurora, and not everybody will survive.

Leaving the Moscow Metro behind has huge implications, the biggest being that we will finally get to see a decaying civilisation cast in sunlight – expanding what parts of the world we are able to gain access to, the people we can interact with, and the horrors we will encounter along the way. "While Moscow has been in a perpetual winter through the previous Metro games, the rest of the world is not suffering the same weather. We wanted to take advantage of this and provide the player with some new and unique experiences to the Metro series," Bloch continues, teasing that *Exodus* will in fact take place over the course of a year, giving us the chance to experience this world in all four seasons, and to meet characters that haven't been caught in the fallout of the previous games.

"As you journey across Russia, you will see the seasons change; starting in winter and moving all the way through each of them will give us the opportunity to show you what the world of Metro looks like in environments and weather that we have never been able to before," Bloch says.

> "IT TOOK US NEARLY TWO YEARS OF ITERATING BEFORE WE GOT THE FORMULA RIGHT"
>
> **ANDRIY PROKHOROV,**
> CREATIVE DIRECTOR

This is a powerful tool in narrative design, last used to great effect in Naughty Dog's *The Last Of Us*. 4A is eager to impress upon us that it has no intention of reusing or "copy and pasting" content, with each season and scenario bringing about all new gameplay opportunities. "Each level of the game, linear or open, takes place in a new location along the journey. All of this affects the types of challenges that Artyom and his team will face: monsters, humans, societies, ideologies, terrain, and supplies to name a few. We've built on the exploration and scavenging that players had to do in previous games to survive – we really take advantage of that in our open levels. We've introduced optional areas that players can explore, where they will find hostile and friendly locals to interact with – places where they can absorb more stories, or possibly obtain equipment and other items," Bloch teases, hesitant to go into any further detail – as eager to keep some degree of mystique surrounding the game as he is to avoid tipping off other studios as to 4A's plans. "The mixture of elements like new locations, terrain types, »

HORSEPOWER

The Metro games have always been visually impressive, but *Exodus* is taking it to another level. What's powering the 2018 release? It is, of course, further improvements made to 4A's stunning proprietary engine. "*Metro Exodus* uses our proprietary engine, the 4A Engine, which we have been developing and using for all our games since the studio was founded," says Jon Bloch, executive producer on *Exodus*. "It was built to be inherently multiplatform – so that our games will take full advantage of each platform's specific strengths natively, they aren't simply ported. We want [to deliver] the best possible experience no matter what platform you play our games on – across a wide range of hardware on PC platforms as well. In addition, with the support of the folks at Microsoft, we are targeting a full 4K HDR experience on Xbox One X."





weather, and societies will provide the player with new challenges and different gameplay experiences over the course of the journey."

The extended demo footage we've seen so far instils great confidence in what's to come. Makeshift weaponry has an ever-bigger presence in *Exodus*, with players afforded more opportunity than ever to tweak the tools at their disposal; we get a hint of the survival sandboxes, sprawling areas full of resources to scavenge and encounters to discover – the way forward once again marked by white flags on a distant horizon. While it should go without saying *Exodus* does, of course, look gorgeous – beautiful and smooth in 4K, every inch packed with scintillating particle effects and environmental detail. This is the game that 4A has been building towards all of these years – the expertise and the passion that is fuelling it is clear for everyone to see.

Why has it taken so long for 4A Games to reveal the next stage in Metro's evolution? Quite simply, three years ago the studio didn't think this game was possible. In spite of its size, and the resources it has available to it, 4A has always had big ambitions – it wants to be considered a triple-A studio, up there alongside the studios working under the Rockstar, Ubisoft and Activision umbrellas.

"It can be hard to stand up against giants like those teams, but we have a pretty competitive drive at the core of the team," says Bloch; he admits it can get a little heated internally, but it's a mutual, friendly, competitive drive that keeps the team pushing for better results. "We've always tried to push harder to accomplish more and more ambitious goals with less people than might be expected… even when we call something 'done' for the sake of a milestone, nothing is ever really 'done', and 'par' is never good enough. In our eyes, it can always be better, especially if someone else is doing it better already."

4A Games never backs away from a fight, particularly one it believes in so fervently. Even though the likes of Rockstar and Ubisoft has teams that, quite literally, dwarf that of the Metro developer – not to mention impossibly large budgets and state of the art technology to work with – the team isn't one to shy away from a challenge. It wants to prove that it is just as capable, able to produce more with less. The Metro games have always been technically accomplished, polished beyond belief and mechanically solid. But 4A isn't content with its lot in life, and that means *Exodus* is perhaps the studio's most important game in its history. But the work that goes into it behind the scenes? We're given one such example, painting a picture of a passionate development team that will stop at nothing to deliver the very best Metro game possible and incentivised by what it sees as its triple-A competition.

"When preparing for our E3 announcement our creative director, Prof, saw some videos [and screenshots] from other games announced just prior to E3. One showed smoke coming from a train that looked really good; much better than what we had at that moment," says Bloch; the game in question? That would be *Red Dead Redemption 2*. An image of a train with gorgeous billowing smoke behind it sent Prof into a spiral; *Exodus* is a game about travelling across Russia in an old train, it *had* to have better looking smoke effects. "Prof spent days and nights focused solely on smoke particles to improve that one detail because it wasn't good enough yet. We may not be able to beat them in every comparable aspect at the end of the day, but we're sure going to try; there's nothing they can do that will ever stop us from trying."



DEDICATION

"First and foremost, we want to make experiences that people want to play and enjoy," says *Metro Exodus*' executive producer Jon Bloch on what drives 4A Games. "We want to reach as many gamers as we can to share something that is really special to us, and that we think they can relate to as well. We want players to immerse and lose themselves in the world we have created, poring over every detail with the same fascination that we have had building it… our creative director 'Prof' likes to call our team a small group of Spartans, and will often rally us as our General to push through challenges in order to achieve more than we thought possible. As long as players keep coming back to support us, and to share these kinds of experiences with us, we will continue to fight like Spartans."



For the first time Artyom will have an actual home. The Aurora will actually expand and change throughout the game, reflecting your progress and choices made.





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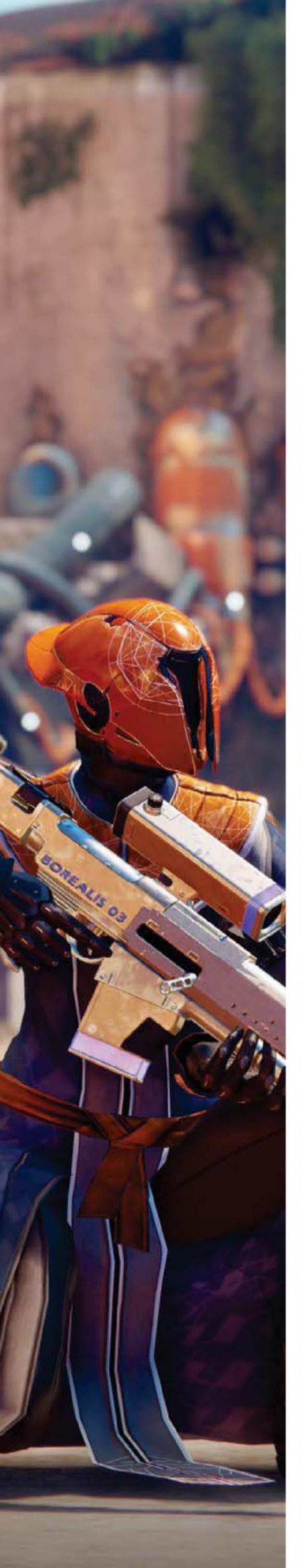
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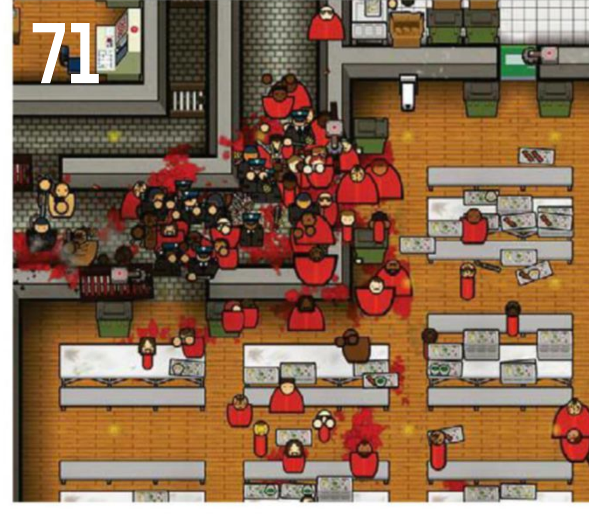


THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:

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#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright

PVP IS A REAL BONE OF CONTENTION, DIVIDING THE PLAYER BASE INTO THOSE WHO LOVE THE NEW 4V4 SETUP AND EMPHASIS ON SKILL AND TACTICS OVER ABILITY SPAM, AND THOSE WHO REALLY, REALLY DON'T

SHOW ME THE WAY

While *Destiny 2* still lacks matchmaking for endgame content like Nightfall Strikes, Trials and raids, Bungie has at least thrown lone wolves a bone in the form of the Guided Games feature. Clan groups looking for an extra player can queue as Guides, while solo players can queue as Seekers, selecting a clan from those available to tag along with. Mic use is recommended but not enforced – if such would even be possible – and at this stage, it's not really clear who exactly you're joining or their experience level. Our first experience saw us load in as a Seeker at 280 Power, only to find that our would-be 'Guides' for the Nightfall were barely clear of the Strike's recommended 240 Power and had never run the mission before. It didn't end well. The system's only in beta right now and there's plenty of room for it to grow, but it's definitely a step in the right direction.





THERE IS A LIGHT THAT NEVER GOES OUT

Destiny 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Bungie
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-26
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: There's always something going on when you load into a patrol area, and things can get really chaotic when several things kick off in the same place at once.



BETTER THAN

DESTINY



AS GOOD AS



BORDERLANDS 2

Left: All factions now work in the same way – turn in the relevant tokens or items to the NPC to increase standing, with randomly rolled rewards from each pool every time you tick over to the next level.

***Destiny 2* came out of the gates with a lot to prove.** While the original certainly grew into its potential over its three-year run, its launch left a lot to be desired in terms of content – not a complaint returning fans would accept having to level for a second time. On paper, *Destiny 2* looks to fall foul of that exact same issue, but the raw numbers don't tell the whole story here. And while those who forego sleep will likely fairly quickly reach a point where progression slows to a crawl, there's a wider assortment of activities and distractions available to cater for Guardians at each end of the commitment spectrum.

First stop will be the campaign, as a lot of the additional modes and features start out gated behind the credits. Bungie has clearly taken criticism of the original's convoluted mess of a narrative on board – that much was clear by *The Taken King*'s story-driven structure just a year after the original's launch – and the result builds splendidly on the baby steps made by *Destiny*'s expansions. It feels more like a traditional FPS campaign, if one where the modular structure naturally means it lacks the coherency and consistency of the linear cinematic likes of *Titanfall 2* or a modern Call Of Duty's story mode. There are still lows – we'd like strong words with whoever thought a forced slow-walking section in a Destiny game was a good idea – but the adventure is enjoyable in spite of them.

In a curious change, story missions aren't freely replayable as they were before, instead with a few offered by the Vanguard for repeat play – at a higher difficulty – each week. Newcomers might also miss out on quite a lot in terms of references. While the overall mission to take down Ghaul makes for a decent self-contained story, only those who have not only played the original but also read up around it will really get the full picture. For fresh kinderGuardians, allusions to the events that led up to this point and to incidental figures, such as warmind Rasputin or the mysterious Osiris, will soar right over their heads – for veterans, some such references and surprises will have you beaming like the first time you cheesed Atheon off his platform. Much of *Destiny*'s superb lore has long been buried in its Grimoire cards and even though Bungie has begun pulling that into the core game now, you'd do well to have a flick through the original's Grimoire online if you want to get a better idea of how everything fits into the bigger picture.

The campaign is now also presented purely through a sequence of regular missions, meaning progression no longer requires teaming up with others to run Strikes. In fact, Strikes in general are massively downplayed in terms of importance – they unlock quite late in the story and while there are only a handful at launch (just five, or six for PS4 players), equivalent gear drops from all other activities mean that sitting in this small playlist and running the same Strikes for hours is no longer necessary. They feel like self-contained mini adventures now, and they're generally stronger than their *Destiny* launch counterparts. Exodus Crash is the only weak link – it feels more like a few Patrol missions strung together leading to a tedious boss than a Strike, especially when the rest of these co-op encounters are so much more fleshed out and involved. Still, Strikes have gone from the best way to gear up in early *Destiny* to being arguably the worst in the sequel. They're longer and more complex than any other means of earning equivalent rewards, meaning there's not a great deal of point in running the playlist right now – hopefully Bungie will find a way to make them a little more relevant in due course, such as adding the Strike-specific loot that was included in *Destiny: The Taken King*.

> **FINGERPRINT**
> WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
> **BETTER TOGETHER:** Most games are better in co-op, but nowhere is that more true than in Destiny. Dropping into a friend's game to help them through a Strike, blasting through an old story mission together, teaming up to dominate the Crucible, finally getting a winning raid team together… it all feels great.

The only time Strikes really come into their own, as it stands, is when the Tuesday reset rolls around and one of them gets to be the challenging Nightfall Strike. Again, modifiers are added to make these three-player sorties tougher and although we've only seen a couple of weeks' worth at the time of writing, we're already confident to call them a step up from the ones used in the first game. Nighfalls run on a strict timer now, an effort to reinforce the need for coordination and teamwork… which, of course, the Destiny elite just took as a challenge,

and pros had managed to solo even the hardest Prestige version within launch week. For less godly Guardians, you need to make canny use of each week's special gimmick for earning extra time – whether that's simply killing as many enemies as possible, literally jumping through hoops or whatever else – in order to beat the clock in beating the boss. While enemies and encounters are more challenging here, the other modifiers seem more skewed in the player's favour this time around. Gone are nightmarish modifiers such as Trickle and Chaff – so far, at least – and even elemental burns look to have been changed up for the better in that they no longer boost incoming damage and they cycle over the course of a Strike, again encouraging coordination and teamwork to use the right abilities and weapons at the right times.

Strangely, Patrol areas have travelled the exact opposite trajectory to Strikes, soaring from borderline useless in the original game to being hands down the best way to quickly earn regular gear for levelling. Nowhere are the streamlining and refinement of *Destiny 2*'s core structures more apparent than when you touch down on one of the four sprawling locations. Story missions and Adventures – short missions designed to flesh out locations and characters – are both activated by triggering beacons in the world rather than just clicking an icon on a map; Public Events – the most reliable source of Exotic Engrams for powerful gear – appear on the map, complete with countdown timers to when they start; Bounties have been retooled as Challenges, daily tasks unique to each area and activity that no longer clog up your inventory; random events are at least fairly interesting and can escalate ongoing encounters further; planetary materials are no longer required for upgrading gear, enabling you to grab them for a rep boost if you feel like it, rather than being beholden to securing every source for future tinkering. It's quite the shopping list of positive changes and if anything, these large patrol spaces are almost *too* good for powering your Guardian up to and even beyond the soft cap of 265 Power. There's still some degree of RNG luck and grinding involved, but it's not even close to that of vanilla *Destiny*. And with so many different ways to hunt down the missing pieces that will bump up your overall Power level, the push towards endgame equipment and stats never feels like a chore.

To that end, it's worth flagging up one of the greatest quality of life changes in the whole game, namely new gear drops having a Power stat based on the theoretical maximum of your entire inventory rather than just on what you're wearing. If you don't like, say, Fusion Rifles (you monster), there's no need to equip them just because it's your best-in-slot option numerically – drops will do all that maths for you, leaving you free to use a loadout you're comfortable with in any activity, and still be earning gear that will help you progress. Regular drops only go as high as 265 Power to begin with but that figure rises once you push past that soft cap, although Luminous Engrams are still going to be doing the vast majority of the legwork. These are earned by completing Milestones and are available weekly, covering everything from putting time into PvP or completing events at the rotating Flashpoint location to getting through Nightfall or raid-tier activities. You might only have a few sources of viable Luminous Engrams – and the 'powerful gear' they contain – to begin with, but break through 280-odd Power and you should be ready to claim the lot each week.

PvP is a real bone of contention, dividing the player base into those who love the new 4v4 setup and emphasis on skill and tactics over ability spam, and those who really, *really* don't. There are arguments to be made on both sides and it'll all come down to personal preference, really – *Destiny*'s competitive multiplayer meta at close of play was a mess of one-hit kill abilities and Ice Breaker waiting games, but at least it was exciting. With abilities weaker and on longer cooldowns – though not nearly to the level seen in the beta – *Destiny 2*'s multiplayer becomes more about teamwork and accurate gunplay, making matches slower and a little more predictable while longer time-to-kill makes it much harder to come out of a 1v2 showdown alive. Trials has also

FAQs

Q. IS THERE AN ACTUAL STORY THIS TIME?
There sure is, and it's much closer to a proper FPS campaign than *Destiny*'s piecemeal vignettes.

Q. HOW IS THE GRIND?
There's a soft cap at Power level 265 that can be tricky to break through, but end game activities will easily push you towards and beyond 300 Power.

Q. IS THE RAID GOOD?
It's very different to any of *Destiny*'s four offerings, much larger in scope and *way* more demanding of perfect coordination and precise execution.



Right: Many enemy types are heavily altered from their original forms, like how Fallen Vandals now scurry around on all fours when panicked.





Above: Public Events are now visible on the map, and each can be upgraded to a Heroic version if you know how. Best bring backup for those – they can be rough. **Right:** Trials has been completely reworked. Power level advantages are no longer enabled so lower level players are free to compete, and presentation and progression are both vastly improved for this competitive PvP mode.

PATROL AREAS HAVE TRAVELLED THE OPPOSITE TRAJECTORY TO STRIKES, SOARING FROM BORDERLINE USELESS TO BEING THE BEST WAY TO QUICKLY EARN GEAR FOR LEVELLING



Left: Cutting down the amount of time spent in orbit downplays the need for fancy ship, but you'll still see them as you move between activities. Below: Yeah, that's definitely what we'd consider an 'anti-air problem' – probably best to go blow it up.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

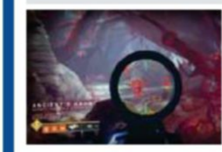
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



Yeah, this is Destiny alright. After the first story mission, a constant flow of new gear means your loadout doesn't stay the same for more than a few minutes at a time.

10 HOURS



That's the campaign done, and level 20 inevitably hit along the way. Now to dig into the postgame, and there's plenty to see and do this time around.

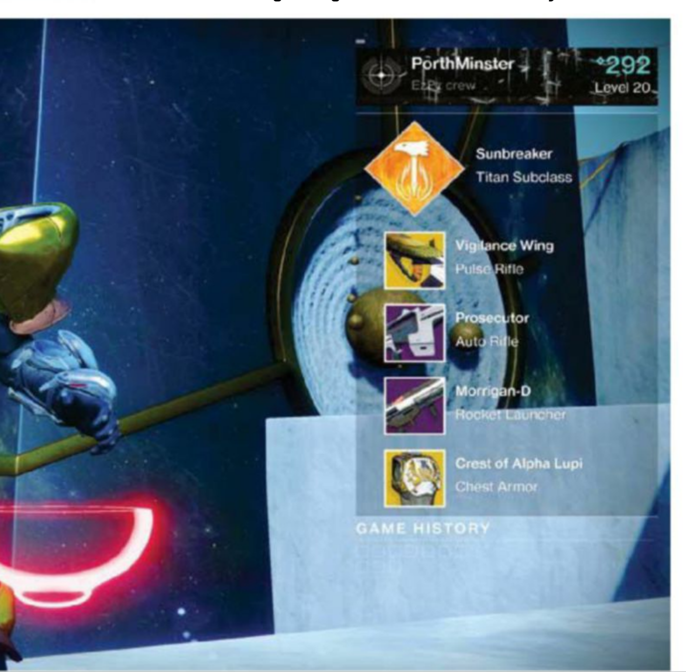
7 DARK NIGHTS



A good week with *Destiny 2* should be enough to reach around Power level 280, which is where you'll want to be for the raid and whatever endgame content Bungie drops next.

TASTE THE RAINBOW

Shaders, *Destiny*'s way of allowing players to recolour their Guardians' gear, have undergone a major overhaul, and it's a real double-edged sword. On the one hand, being able to apply individual colour swaps to individual armour parts – and now to non-Exotic weapons as well; Exotics instead retain *Destiny*'s Ornament system for rare reskins – is a Fashion dream come true, leading to mix-and-match sets that can look better than just dipping your armour into a large pot of paint. However, they're now consumable items rather than a lasting catalogue, and the rarer/shinier/nicer ones are typically a lot harder to come by. You can earn a good amount just by levelling up beyond 20 and earning Bright Engrams each time, and more common ones drop plentifully from various activities. But if you want a full set of, say, the raid shader, it'll take several runs to get and should you need more, you'll need to assemble your Fireteam once again to go off in search of more shiny.



undergone changes that make it better for both players and spectators - unique, fixed maps, and loadouts are locked on startup and shown off pre-match. Iron Banner is set to return soon and the meta will, of course, shift as Bungie tweaks things behind the scenes. But it's very much a 'try it for yourself' affair – it's mechanically decent at worst, but it won't be to everyone's tastes. And that's fine, because you don't have to play it if you don't want to.

That's perhaps the part of *Destiny 2* that really demonstrates one of the key lessons the team learned over the course of three years of highs and lows with the original game – variety is key. In the early days, raid gear was the only way to reach maximum level, excluding both those incapable of assembling a six-person team and those who had somehow incurred the wrath of RNGsus from capping out. Now, that system is accompanied by a handful of other ways to max out Power, allowing solo, PvE and PvP players to all have a shot at the top, although those who dabble in everything that *Destiny 2* has to offer will more than likely reach that goal sooner than those who, for instance, might not want or be able to raid. And given the nature of the first raid in *Destiny 2*, it's not going to be a viable source of endgame gear for everyone.

You see, Leviathan is a cruel and curious beast. Going in blind and trying to figure everything out for yourself is absolutely the best way to experience a Destiny raid so we'll switch comms to 'vague' at this point, but suffice to say it's the greatest challenge of team coordination and communication Bungie has ever produced. It's mechanics-heavy like the King's Fall raid and more encounter-led like a longer, *way* more complex Crota's End than the Wrath Of The Machine boss rush, all with that same sense of mystery you felt on your first journey into the Vault Of Glass. Given its unique structure – we've already said too much – and with demand for perfection from players, it's not something everyone is going to be able to get through, even with a guide in front of them. Frankly, there's never been a better example of why matchmaking for Destiny's endgame activities is a horrible idea – we would sooner move in with the Hive than even consider how hellish running Leviathan with five random players would be.

Bungie's roadmap for the game's first weeks and months shows new seasonal events and activities coming every few weeks, so we're confident that the game will have legs just like its predecessor – a steady flow of new content should keep even the most ardent fans busy, so let's hope that's what is in store. The studio built great things on weaker foundations with the previous game, so it's going to be exciting to see just how tall a Tower it can build when it's working off an even stronger base from day one.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CHARACTER BUILDING: Having the Vanguard leaders and other NPCs play a more active part in the campaign and side missions give both you and them a greater sense of purpose – you're actually working together to achieve something rather than simply running errands for them.

VERDICT 8/10
A BRIGHT START

ABSOL-UTE COMBAT.

Absolver

Look, comparing a game to *Dark Souls* has become a fair old cliché in 2017, where any game that has an unforgiving difficulty gets From Software's masterpiece thrown at it, regardless of the genre. Sure, *Absolver* has the silent encounters with other players, boss battles and non-linear progression, as well as a few mechanical queues similar to games in the 'Soul's-like' sub genre, but at its heart, *Absolver* is very different. *Absolver* has the heart of a fighting game.

Absolver, like the actual martial arts that make up its core, is a journey of self-improvement. You play as a Prospect, a student who is set out into the world of Adal to learn their place in the world and become the titular 'Absolver'. After a brief tutorial, the game tells you of two major boss encounters and seven 'Marked Ones', high level enemies that patrol certain areas, and they all need beating in order to open a door to a giant tower that sits in the centre of the area map – and that's it. You can tackle them when you find them, at any time and in any order. It won't take you more than a few evenings to get these all tucked in and beat what is the main quest thread, but all this does is act as a framework to push all players along the same critical path.

As you roam Adal, which is made up of a few large areas connected by what are essentially corridors, other players will drop into a shared area and it is the interactions had with them that are one of *Absolver*'s great strengths. Much like thatgamecompany's PlayStation-exclusive *Journey*, you have no direct way to communicate with them, just a series of emote animations and, of course, your fists. Non-verbal communication is as fascinating here as it is in Sony's game, with things like the act of turning your back on another player a sign of pacifism or disrespect. This creates some great moments, a thumbs-up to the player who helped you out of a bind, or a dismissive shrug to the body of someone who tried to cheapshot you. You'll remember these interactions. So will your enemies.

The core of the combat is the Combat Deck, a list of all of the moves you have

ABSOLVER SHINES WHEN IT ALLOWS YOU TO EXPRESS YOURSELF THROUGH THE COMBAT



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Sloclap
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



FAQs

Q. CAN I BECOME A MASTER?
Once you've hit level five in PvP, you can make a school for your style of combat.

Q. ANY NG+?
Sort of. After you have 'finished' *Absolver*, you can roam the world and take part in combat trials.

Q. HOW DO WEAPONS WORK?
You can find swords or spiked gloves, each with their own move set! They break after use, however.









Below: The larger areas, where you find most of the other players and target enemies are separated by a few caves and forest paths, similar to *Monster Hunter*, albeit without the jarring loading sequences.

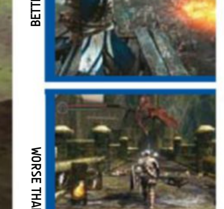
Above: The world of *Absolver* is well realised. Although you can't walk straight over to the Tower of Adal like an open world game, you can see it early on and eventually make your way over to it though separate areas.
Left: During combat, monitoring your stamina bar is crucial, since it dictates every aspect of the fight – attacks, dodging and blocking – and should it expire, you usually follow it. Another very *Dark Souls* part of the game.











BETTER THAN

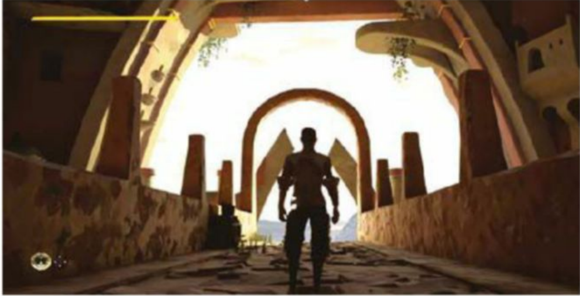
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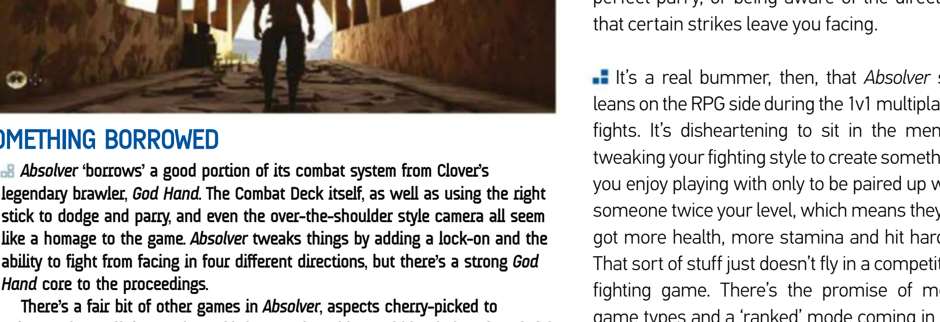


WORSE THAN

DARK SOULS







SOMETHING BORROWED

Absolver 'borrows' a good portion of its combat system from Clover's legendary brawler, *God Hand*. The Combat Deck itself, as well as using the right stick to dodge and parry, and even the over-the-shoulder style camera all seem like a homage to the game. *Absolver* tweaks things by adding a lock-on and the ability to fight from facing in four different directions, but there's a strong *God Hand* core to the proceedings.

There's a fair bit of other games in *Absolver*, aspects cherry-picked to enhance the stuff that *God Hand* brings to the table. *Bushido Blade*'s 'thoughtful' pace and freedom of movement during a battle mix with *Journey*'s silent communication with others create combat that reaches for something far beyond the RPG shell that *Absolver* sits in.

learned on your travels and you place them into an attack queue in the order they will come out when used. They're all animated together fluidly, no matter what moves you put in the chain. Unlocking more moves and piecing together your own deck is a lot of fun, and if you feel you have built something really good, you can become a master of your own 'school' and take on students, who get instant access to your specific move set.

As you roam *Absolver*'s world map, picking fights or helping others, all the time you'll be improving at the combat, whether that's discovering new ways to utilise certain moves or developing a better understanding of distance, for example, as well as gaining actual experience points to advance a few statistics that govern damage, health and the other usual parameters. For the most part, though, these stats are not as important as learning how to read an enemy's attack and perform a perfect parry, or being aware of the direction that certain strikes leave you facing.

It's a real bummer, then, that *Absolver* still leans on the RPG side during the 1v1 multiplayer fights. It's disheartening to sit in the menus, tweaking your fighting style to create something you enjoy playing with only to be paired up with someone twice your level, which means they've got more health, more stamina and hit harder. That sort of stuff just doesn't fly in a competitive fighting game. There's the promise of more game types and a 'ranked' mode coming in the future, which hopefully removes all gear and stat bonuses and leaves fighters to battle it out in a true test of who is the best.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

INVITE ONLY: The areas in *Absolver* are split into individual servers that support up to four random players, so it's unlikely you'll stumble across friends unless you invite them to a specific co-op session.

Learning moves is also a bit of a tiresome process. By blocking enemy attacks, you slowly begin to learn them. By using your defensive skill on them, you learn the move even faster. This has a great idea behind it since, by the time you can use it, you'll be well and truly versed in defending against it too. Unfortunately, the reality is that you end up just letting your enemy get some digs in before you beat them and when you're at a high level, this becomes a bit of a grind.

It's also worth noting that, although the PC version runs smoothly, the PS4 version has a constantly choppy frame rate and big freezes in the action whenever any player enters the server you're in. The slick martial arts action is somewhat undermined by how rough it can be in the more impressively detailed areas and, frankly, it needs fixing.

Absolver has a bit of an identity crisis too. When it's focused on the RPG side of things, it's a bit basic, with some really grind-y aspects to character advancement. Upping statistics might grant you more damage, but that's a much less useful thing to have than the knowledge of an opponent's combo strings, or a read on their tendencies. Predictably, when the combat is pushed to the forefront, it's a fantastic fighting game, one that has real potential to stick around when the additional modes are added, especially the ranked matches. *Absolver* shines when it allows you to express yourself through the combat, not through the numbers that hide behind it all.



VERDICT 7/10

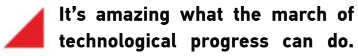
A GREAT MIX OF STYLES THAT ALMOST WORKS

ENGAGE RETRO THRUSTERS NOW

Star Fox 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: SNES
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nintendo/ Argonaut Games
PRICE: Included in £69.99 hardware
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



It's amazing what the march of technological progress can do. The original, 1993 *Star Fox* was a game of spectacle and style, thanks to the 3D graphics generated by its Super FX chip. Just a few years later, a modestly improved implementation of those polygonal graphics would have been on the low end of 3D consumer graphics, and not nearly impressive enough to sell on style alone. Thankfully, this is something that Nintendo and Argonaut Games accounted for, and *Star Fox 2* is a game that offers significantly more substance than its predecessor.

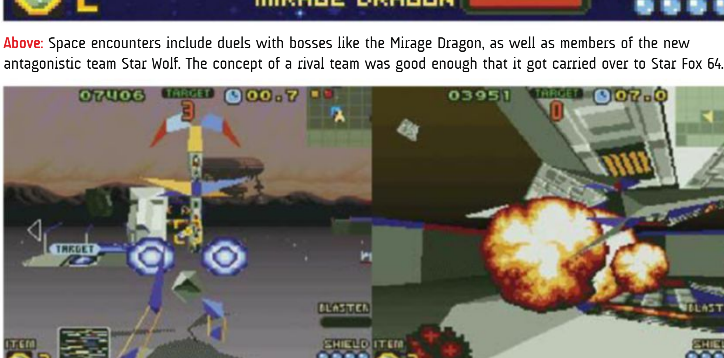
The key to *Star Fox 2* is that you choose how best to defend Corneria. At the beginning of the game you're presented with a map, which shows planetary missile bases, roaming fighter squadrons and battle cruisers, all of which are primed to attack your home planet. Do you prioritise the missile bases? Do you ignore the fighters heading for Corneria and prioritise the battle cruiser spawning them? You're free to implement your own preferred strategy – the only conditions are that Corneria must not be destroyed, and your antagonist, Andross, must be stopped within 100 units of in-game time.

When it comes to fighting the battles you choose, you've got more choice than in the original. Instead of playing as Fox McCloud, you can choose your pilot from the six members of the Star Fox team, whose craft now have their own statistics and associated special items. Instead of on-rails missions, you have freedom of flight within space and planetary environments, and you can choose to transform the Arwing into a ground-based walker, which offers greater control at the expense of manoeuvrability.

With the difficulty set to normal, wiping out the bad guys and taking down Andross isn't difficult. However, you're graded on your score at the end of the game, and your initial result will probably only be passable – the goal here is to push yourself further, minimising the damage to Corneria and the time taken to complete your task, before challenging the tougher difficulty levels. Coupled with the freedom you're given in your approach to the task at hand, this provides long-term replay value which mitigates the short initial completion time.

Though *Star Fox 2* was a forward-thinking game at the time it was designed, being left on the shelf for two decades means that a lot of its best ideas have been plundered – not least by later Star Fox games, which means there are fewer surprises than you might expect here. The technology is also undeniably dated, and for some the frame rate will simply be too low to tolerate today. Still, *Star Fox 2* is enjoyable removed from its own era, and without nostalgia on its side that's an indication of timeless game design.

Above: Space encounters include duels with bosses like the Mirage Dragon, as well as members of the new antagonistic team Star Wolf. The concept of a rival team was good enough that it got carried over to Star Fox 64.

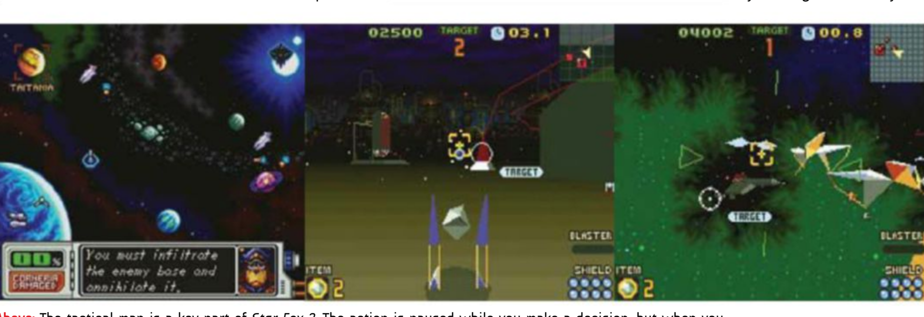


ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EXTRA SUPER: The use of an updated Super FX chip gives better 3D performance than the original *Star Fox*.
FREE RANGE: Being able to choose your own flight path makes for much more exciting and free-form missions.

BETTER THAN: STAR FOX
WORSE THAN: STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER



Above: The tactical map is a key part of *Star Fox 2*. The action is paused while you make a decision, but when you set a path, enemies simultaneously make their own moves. Success depends on pre-emptively fending off attacks.



A WORTHY TRIP BACK IN TIME

FRIENDS WHO SERVE TIME TOGETHER, ESCAPE TOGETHER

The Escapists 2



There's no puzzle quite like unlocking your own freedom, and much like its previous instalment, *The Escapists 2* turns escaping virtual incarceration into a full on crime caper. And while it might have a new lick of sprite-based paint (including the power to customise your jumpsuited con), the same risk/reward setup is at play: serve your time, gather some tools and plan your escape. However, fall foul of the guards – or your fellow incarcerees – and you'll be straight back to square one.

It's the one constant that makes *The Escapists 2* both compelling and rewarding in equal measure. Each of the ten joints on offer – ranging from modern supermaxes to Western-themed jails and off-shore platforms – is filled with countless items that can be combined to make all sorts of weapons and escape-friendly implements, and you can spend virtual days stockpiling items in your cell. But there's always that ever looming danger that a guard might rumble your tunnel digging or randomly select your cell for inspection.

Much like the real thing (we can only assume), it's all about playing the long game and it's here that this freedom-chasing sim can sometimes be as frustrating as its predecessor. It's all about investing in your chosen prisoner. Hitting the gym can improve your stats, making you tougher in a fight, which now benefits from an improved combat system; while performing tasks for fellow inmates – ranging from innocent item retrievals to far less savoury beat downs – will net you the cash you need to buy tools or rarer items for crafting. However, pulling off the perfect disappearing act can often take a little too long to plan with that insta-fail danger always threatening to unravel it all.

It's a very familiar conundrum, and is one that developer Mouldy Toof clearly doesn't want to steer too far from, but there's at least some fresh meat to help pass your sentence. New multiplayer local/online modes enable you to team up with up to three others to co-operatively plan an escape. Working together does make the busywork and mundane routines easier to bare, especially when it comes to pooling resources. Versus mode, where you race one another to escape, also riffs on the formula, stripping away all the fluff into a single day's frantic efforts to skip the fence. It's easily our favourite new mode, and proof the game can work just as well in short bursts.

The Escapists 2 certainly isn't trying to rewrite its own blueprint, but if you loved juggling the mundane routines and managing your resources in the original game you'll appreciate the little touches Mouldy Toof has made this time around. Adding in co-op – especially the ability to play drop in/drop out splitscreen – and competitive multiplayer might not be revolutionary, but they give this indie romp a new lease of life behind bars.

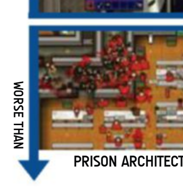
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Switch
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Mouldy Toof Studios
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

THE ESCAPISTS





PRISON ARCHITECT

WORSE THAN

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

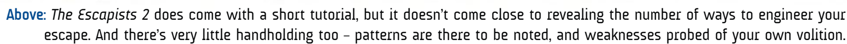
RANDOM RIOT: While the new map packs are great fun, dedicated escape artists will soon learn every weakness or route. Its sequel would have greatly benefitted from randomly generated layouts.

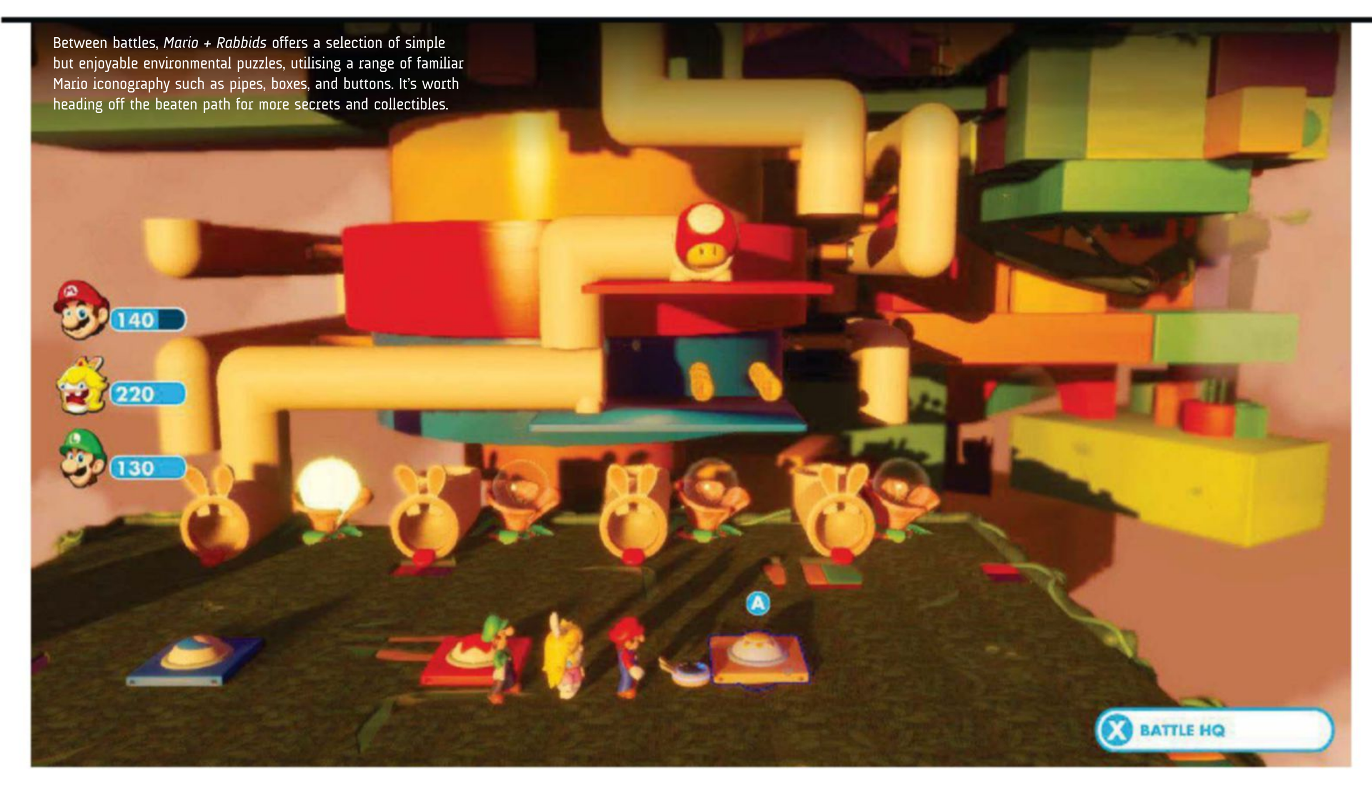
VERDICT 7/10

FUN AND FRUSTRATING SOLO, BUT A RIOT TOGETHER






Above: *The Escapists 2* does come with a short tutorial, but it doesn't come close to revealing the number of ways to engineer your escape. And there's very little handholding too – patterns are there to be noted, and weaknesses probed of your own volition.



Between battles, *Mario + Rabbids* offers a selection of simple but enjoyable environmental puzzles, utilising a range of familiar Mario iconography such as pipes, boxes, and buttons. It's worth heading off the beaten path for more secrets and collectibles.

DOWN THE RABBID HOLE

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle

It's a weird one, this. On the face of it, *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* just shouldn't work. The story's incomprehensibly naff, the gameplay's a significant departure from the platforming we know and love, the camera's floaty and frustrating, and… well, it's Mario. And Rabbids. Together. It should be catastrophic.

You will see *Mario + Rabbids* described as a tactical, turn-based game in the vein of *XCOM*, and as irritatingly repetitive as that comparison is, without anything else to compare it to, it'll have to suffice here, too. Dotted along a typically Mario-esque landscape – coins, pipes, Piranha plants, you know the kind of thing – you'll take on a selection of goofy enemies by way of grid-based combat zones. The goal alternates – sometimes you need to clear the field, other times you just need to reach the checkpoint, occasionally you must escort a character safely – but the key motivation is always the same: get it done before you get done.

Despite their deceptively eccentric exteriors, your enemies are able to survey the battlefield with a cold, calculating efficiency. There is little room for error and a huge learning curve. Sure, the game purports that there's an Easy Mode, but given all that does is top up your HP before you venture into the fight, that too is surprisingly stingy. And as neither the Mario nor Rabbids franchises have offered anything quite like this before, newbies to the tactical turn-based genre might find that they die. A lot.

There's a cover system that protects both your team and your enemies, and as your arsenal and experience grows, so does your power – and your team roster, too. But it never feels like it's getting easier, even if Rabbid Peach can heal from the sidelines, or Mario can intercept enemy moves with an additional shot. There's little explanation of how your newly acquired powers work, and while the Combat Cam helps you to scout an area before – and even during – a battle, it's usually experimentation alone that'll get you effectively chaining attacks.

In between battles you get to explore, and the occasional environmental puzzle is a welcome distraction, if rarely a challenging one. But it's a stunning world, this Rabbids-infused Mushroom Kingdom, stuffed with the colour and gentle comedy we've come to expect from Mario games. Coupled with the comedic beats of the Rabbids, it'll pull a reluctant half-smile from even the hardest hearts.

There's definitely a lot to love here; the environments, the animations, the score, the cast – we even have a begrudging affection for the Rabbids, too. But while the game varies your enemies, what doesn't change is the gameplay… and that'll get stale pretty quickly.

Let's face it: there's no reason why Team Mario should team up with Rabbids for anything. Quite how the hell this happened, we have no idea… but we're glad it did.

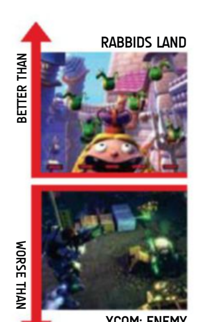
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

RAVIN' RABBIDS: There's a lot of physical comedy stuffed into this messed-up, mashed-up world, but seeing Rabbid Peach pull out her phone for yet another selfie never gets old.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





IN AN HAUER OF NEED

Observer



Above: The environment in *Observer* is constantly oppressive, making you crave the escape of hacking into subject's heads – even though that offers no real relief.

AR mechanics and overlays are overdone in games – detective modes and visual aids detract from so many titles they appear in, taking away from the game experience and becoming something of an 'easy mode' whenever your character uses them. *Observer* turns that trope on its head. The game builds itself around a series of different detective modes – cybernetic, organic and one built entirely around *your* observation skills.

Observer is a detective point-and-click game masquerading as a horror game. It constantly pokes and tugs at your expectations, refusing to give you jump scares when you expect them and laying on the sense of foreboding thickly when you think you're ready for a break. The claustrophobic Krakow apartment block the game is almost entirely set in summons impressions of Ballard's *High Rise* mixed with Dick's *Do Androids Dream*. Your main character – a grizzled, addicted gumshoe – smacks of Deckard but has all the neuroses of Liang: this is a work that wears its dystopian fiction on its sleeve, proudly.

The narrative that runs under the real star of the game (that cyber-brutalist setting) is a slow consideration of transhumanism and where technology is leading us as a species – something that's meditated on via murder, dismemberment and psychosis. The game gets in your head by repeatedly intentionally glitching out, using the whole cyber-noir landscape as an excuse to trick you as a player. For the most part, this is fascinating and unexpected, but then there are times where it genuinely impedes the gameplay and dulls the rhythm… something that genre stablemate *Soma* has managed to avoid.

Other gameplay complaints come from the likes of the now-standard horror game trope of avoiding one specific lumbering-but-deadly enemy (thanks, *Outlast*). Instant fail, trial-and-error gameplay sequences seem to contrast with the rest of *Observer*'s outlook and steady pace, and it's the game's most severe issue.

These moments are largely offset by the game's eponymous Observer mechanic – where you can jack into people's minds and relive their memories with a kind-of psychoactive ability. This is by far the most intriguing part of the game from a narrative standpoint, though *Observer* never seems to quite reach the level of storytelling of its genre rivals, which is a damn shame considering how much potential the game's setting has.

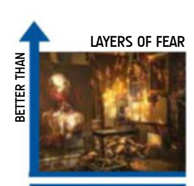
We'll give *Observer* this: it's compelling. It's one of the most gripping short games we've had the pleasure of playing in recent months, it's seven-hour lifespan never outstaying its welcome or diffusing the innate tension or intrigue. With every inventive visual trick, there's a perfect aural accompaniment to match, and the industrial thrum of the game's soundtrack helps keep the thick atmosphere ticking over effortlessly. *Observer* is a Philip K. Dick tale for the *Black Mirror* generation, with the inventive ideals of the former with all the production values of the latter.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Aspyr
DEVELOPER: Bloober Team
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LAYERS OF FEAR





WORSE THAN

SOMA

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

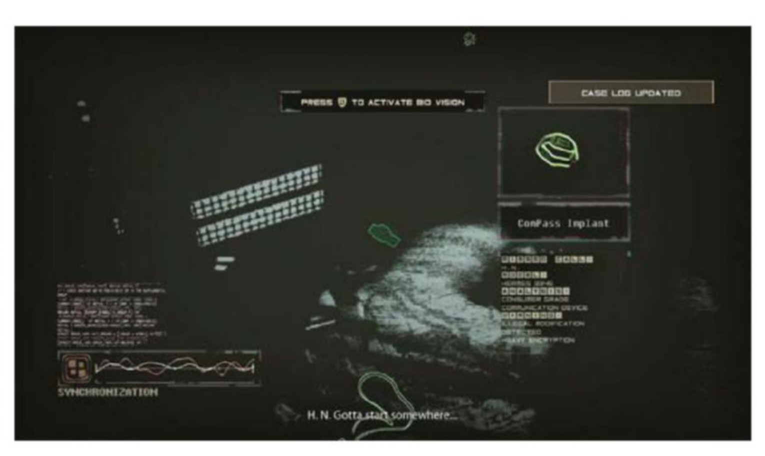
STUCK IN A RUTGER: Rutger Hauer, who starred as Roy Batty in *Blade Runner*, plays the main character in the game, lending his unique gravel to the game's already gritty soundscape.

VERDICT 7/10

A WALKING SIM VIA THE BEST OF DYSTOPIAN FICTION

Below: A well-voiced cast falls at the centre of a mystery that'll keep you captivated for the game's entire seven-hour lifespan, and is likely to constantly blindside you.





BIGGER AND TOUGHER THAN THE COMPETITION.

Ark: Survival Evolved

That famous scene in *Jurassic Park*, where Dr. Grant encounters the humongous brachiosaurus for the first time, is pretty much what this game strives to be, again and again. Its world is so dense with foliage and fauna, wildlife crawling over every inch of its lush environments, that you discover new creatures every few minutes. For anyone who grew up obsessed with dinosaurs, there's a near limitless joy to stumbling upon a creature and being able to say "Oh, that's a such and such!" That the world is this dense with literally dozens upon dozens of different types of creatures on screen at any given time, while running so smooth, is tremendous. Doing this while also being an online experience with up to 70 players is almost unparalleled. When well-known survival games like *DayZ* struggle to keep track of a few zombies, *Ark*'s ability to host a game world this rich is a huge feature in itself.

It helps that *Ark* is not some bland or procedurally generated game world. While players reshape the landscape drastically this is fundamentally a fixed space, one that has personality. Taking a raft down a foggy river as beasts snarl unseen in trees on the shore delivers on moments that feel evocative of so much fiction, whether it be *Jurassic Park* or *King Kong*. You're in a dangerous world and the game takes pleasure in reminding you. What matters, is that these dark swamps, towering forests and deep caverns can all be learned. On a practical level it's useful because this lets experienced players reliably guide new ones around this huge world. Yet perhaps even better is the sense of achievement that comes with being able to navigate with confidence – it just wouldn't be the same within a randomly generated world.

But enough about discovery; *Ark* is a survival game and for all its frequent wonder, it is nonetheless an unforgiving one on its default settings. The game has an almost comical number of ways to die. Snakes that send you unconscious with a venomous bite. Birds that snatch your equipment and insects that drain your stamina before swarming you in droves.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC

OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS4

ORIGIN: US

PUBLISHER: Studio Wildcard

DEVELOPER: In-house

PRICE: £49.99

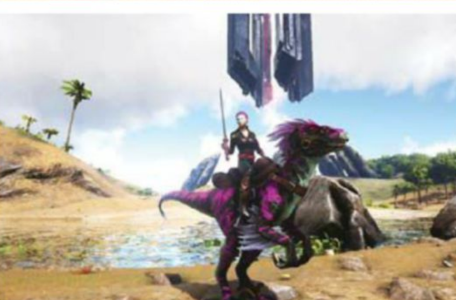
RELEASE: Out Now

PLAYERS: 1-70

MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8.1/10(64-Bit Version), Intel Core i5-2400/AMD FX-8320 or better, 8GB RAM, NVIDIA GTX 670 2GB/AMD Radeon HD 7870 2GB, 60GB available storage space

ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





Right: Nothing beats taming the wild and painting your own dinosaur bright pink. Customisation options are pretty extensive too. The paint editor allows some fine control. Below: Building a raft is an early step to some real exploration. Just be careful of what's waiting for you in the water.

THE GAME HAS AN ALMOST COMICAL NUMBER OF WAYS TO DIE



FAQs

Q. IS THIS LIKE RUST?
There are similarities, like the character always being present in the game server but they seldom feel alike.

Q. IS IT LIKE TUROK?
There are dinosaurs but you'll spend as much time trying to tame or befriend them as you will fighting them. Also, no Cerebral Bore.

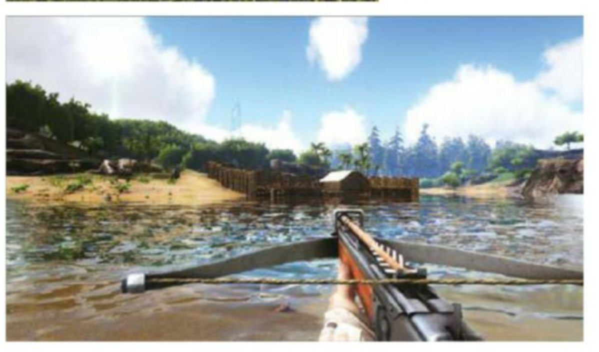
Q. DO I HAVE TO PLAY WITH OTHERS?
Nope, there is a single player mode with extensive difficulty customisation. You are free to enjoy the game on your own way.

BETTER THAN
RUST



AS GOOD AS
THE FOREST





BIGGER THAN NOAH'S ARK

Ark: Survival Evolved currently contains 151 different creatures. These include herbivores and carnivores from across the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods. Everything from the fearsome T-Rex to the lowly Dilophosaurus. Not to mention all the extensive sea monsters lurking in the depths. There are also other non-dinosaur prehistoric animals such as the sabretooth and mammoth. Also included are a host of truly enormous insects. And Dung Beetles.

Expect to die often and unexpectedly. It can be frustrating and you'll swear aloud many times. Each death is a harsh learning experience.

Like almost any survival game, construction is a core component. Weapons, armour and tools must be built to progress, with numerous structures available for base building. *Ark* has a nice system in which you level up, increasing your character's abilities, and you also get awarded points to spend unlocking blueprints for new items. Want to focus on weapons? Building a home? Your choice. Or perhaps you want to focus on getting those dyes and haircuts that can maximise your characters tremendous fashion sense? All fair. The slow trickle of blueprints means that you're never overwhelmed with choice in those early hours but have choices all the same.

The game does get bogged down in some maddeningly arbitrary requirements at times. Items that seem simple enough to build will insist on some obscure resource. This is a means of pushing you to explore, of course, but it's convoluted all the same. Then there's the durability system. It is practically painless once you get metal weapons but early on there's a frustratingly random chance of your tools breaking. Despite having a bar depicting duration, a new spear can break on its first hit or it's twentieth without warning. Survival games being harsh is not unexpected, but battling an invisible dice roll removes a lot of control. You can only prepare so much and if the game decides it wants to break your stuff then so be it.

While the tech tree may be convoluted, it provides an absolutely vast array of ways to play the game, especially against other players. Traps, siege weapons, camouflage, it's all here. It's worth considering defences too as logging out leaves your player character in the world but asleep, vulnerable to other players or wildlife.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EASE UP: While the wide range of *Ark*'s technology tree is impressive, having less convoluted requirements to build many items would go a long way to making it easier for players to devise strategies in the early game. A better User Interface would also go a long way to improving the experience.

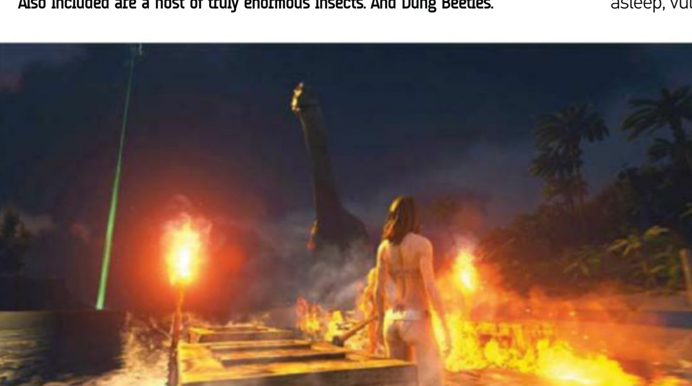
Yet cooperation is a real joy. The world is already harsh enough, so coordinating with friends to build a new home or tame a tricky beast often feels like the best way to tackle things. Even the quieter moments are better in company – a breather between obstacles that makes it all worthwhile.

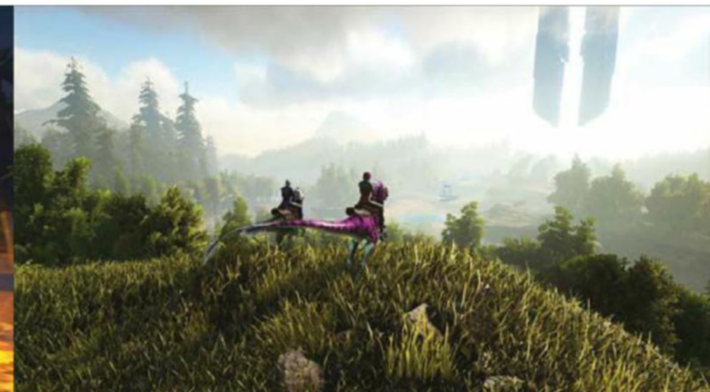
Ark's most compelling feature is the ability to tame and ride most creatures in the game. A difficult process but each beast tamed opens up entirely new experiences. Tamed triceratops for instance can be used to gather huge quantities of wood, cutting down on your resource gathering time. Or a raptor can be ridden into combat, allowing you to hunt and slay other dinosaurs with ease. The crowning jewel, of course, might be when you finally tame a flying creature. That huge, game world you spent so many hours struggling through is transformed when seen from above.

If you want to see the deepest depths of the game you'll need to harness everything available to you. There is a story of sorts buried in the game world. Not so subtle clues exist to direct your attention but ultimately it's your choice whether to engage or not. Do so and you'll find bosses, dungeons and rewards. Just expect to be many hours in before you see it.

Ark is near masterful in its ability to keep you caught up in a sense of discovery. There always seems to be more. Dinosaurs you've never seen, areas you've only heard about. And with each discovery, you find even more waiting on the horizon. That perpetual state of seeing and learning, makes *Ark* a joy in spite of its harsh challenges. This is a game that trades in awe and wonder. If you're willing to deal with a harsh learning curve, a massive, exciting adventure awaits.

VERDICT 8/10
A SURVIVAL GAME WITH CLEAR GOALS – AND DINOSAURS





REALISTIC SURVIVAL AT THE END OF THE WORLD

The Long Dark



A geomagnetic storm brings bush pilot Will Mackenzie's plane down in the frozen wilds of northern Canada, forcing him into a gruelling battle for survival. He wakes up surrounded by flaming wreckage, starving, hypothermic, and lost in one of the most inhospitable places on the planet. Your job is keeping him alive.

There are two ways to play *The Long Dark*. Wintermute is an episodic story mode following Mackenzie as he searches for his friend in the wilderness. It's almost entirely linear, with tutorials designed to drip-feed the game's intricate systems. It teaches you essential skills, such as starting fires and treating wounds, for example.

Then there's Sandbox, which is a lot more freeform and open-ended. There are no objectives here, no endgame. You make your own stories and explore at your leisure, journeying through a series of vast interconnected maps, doing whatever it takes to survive. This freedom makes it much more interesting than Wintermute, which relies a little too heavily on long-winded fetch quests.

But the story mode is a good place to start. You're subtly guided from location to location, while getting hopelessly lost is unavoidable in Sandbox. Some features are disabled until the game teaches you them, while the options available in Sandbox can be overwhelming for a new player.

Like many survival games, everything in *The Long Dark* boils down to managing a series of constantly dwindling meters: namely hunger, thirst, and tiredness. But it's the variety of imaginative ways you can deal with these needs – based on real-world survival tactics – that makes the simulation here so totally compelling.

Sprained your ankle after a nasty fall? Pluck some rosehips from a bush and make a tea from them to craft a natural painkiller. Dehydrated? Scoop up some snow and boil it over your campfire to create safe drinking water. Having trouble starting a fire? Grab some old man's beard lichen from a tree to use as tinder.

But there are just as many ways to die in *The Long Dark*, which makes it a brutal, uncompromising game at times. Wolf and bear attacks are a constant frustration, spoiling the otherwise slow, understated atmosphere of the game. And something as simple as eating spoiled meat or sleeping without a fire can kill you.

As unforgiving as this landscape is, the hand-painted textures, vividly colourful sunsets, and shifting weather make it a strangely beautiful, and eerie place for you to survive in. And the cutscenes that appear in the Wintermute part are wonderfully animated, presenting a melancholy, emotional story befitting these bleak surroundings.

Survival games are often plagued by inconsistent, scrappy design, but *The Long Dark* is impressively polished and refined. Wintermute is a mixed bag, unfortunately, but the stories that emerge naturally from the Sandbox as a result of Hinterland's deep, elegant simulation ultimately prove to be much more memorable.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EASY RIDE: You can disable animal attacks on Pilgrim difficulty, but it makes everything else triflingly easy. The game would benefit from being able to tame animals and retain the challenge of harder modes.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Hinterland
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £26.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB GPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN



THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD

WORSE THAN

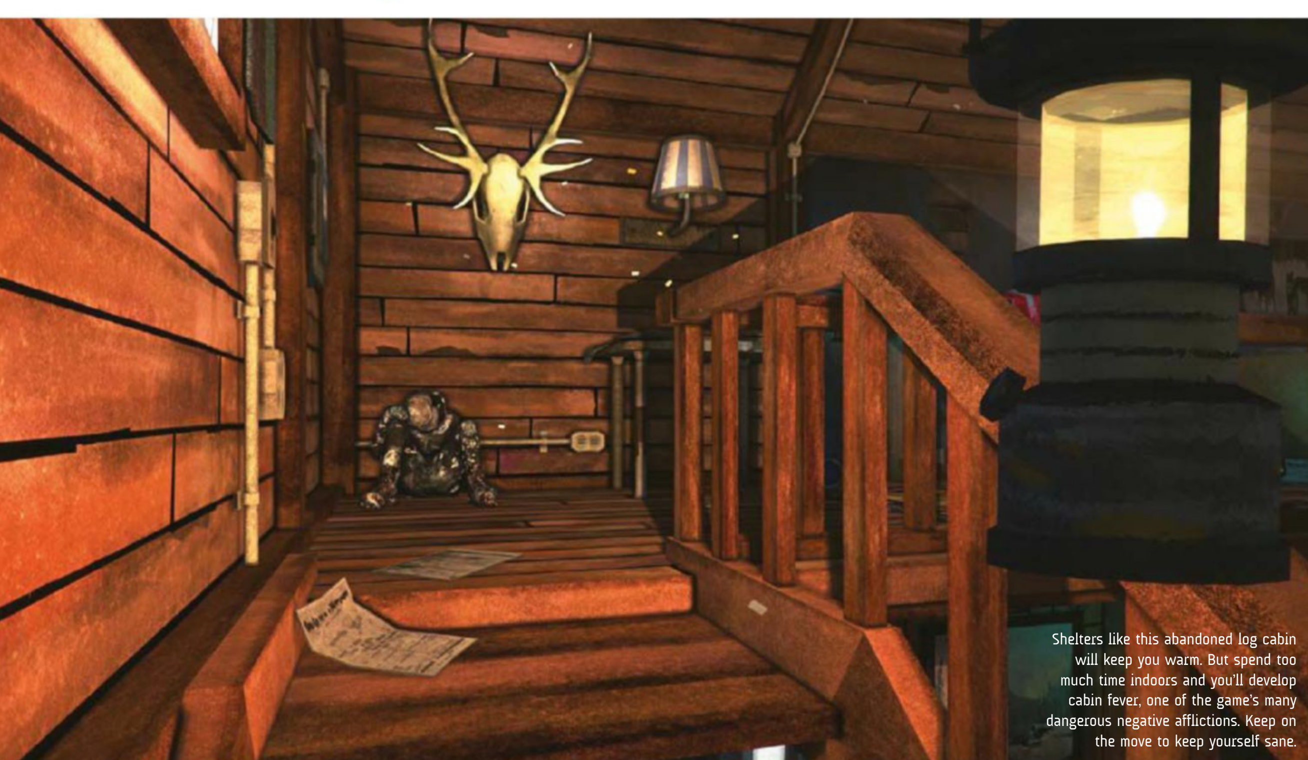


DON'T STARVE



VERDICT 7/10

A BEAUTIFUL SIMULATION OF WILDERNESS SURVIVAL



Shelters like this abandoned log cabin will keep you warm. But spend too much time indoors and you'll develop cabin fever, one of the game's many dangerous negative afflictions. Keep on the move to keep yourself sane.



A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Knack II

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: SIE Japan Studio
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

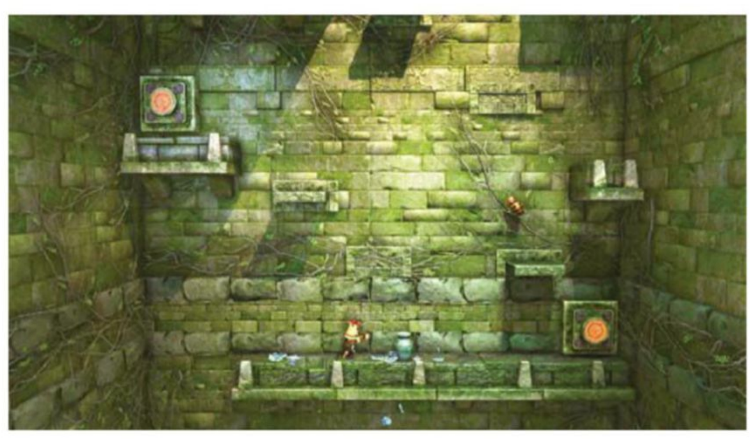


Crash Bandicoot, Jak And Daxter, Ratchet & Clank, and Spyro The Dragon. Each of these iconic 3D action series have been graced by the touch of master engineer Mark Cerny in one way or another. After a long and illustrious career he has become something of a fixer in this industry, the person you call when some area of design needs to be improved; be it the PlayStation 4 itself, retro classics like *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, or even development hell dwelling projects such as *The Last Guardian* – his influence is impossible to quantify. But if there is to be one task that escapes even his expertise it is bound to be this: making the Knack series resemble anything close to a success.

Knack II is certainly a better constructed and resoundingly more entertaining adventure than its lacklustre predecessor, but the landscape has shifted somewhat in four years – a multitude of new entries to these classic series have arrived, as have lovingly crafted HD remakes. All that has done is reveal a hollow shell where Knack's heart should lie. The aforementioned 3D games combined platforming, action combat, sharp humorous writing, and colourful characters to create packages that were as fun to play as they were iconic.









Above: *Knack II* has a handful of good ideas, particularly when it plays with the fact that Knack can shift his size and weight, but much of this is tough to bear when wrapped in such an obnoxiously rote story, mission and set of objectives. **Below:** Every level sees Knack start from a small construction to a towering monstrosity. It's expected, but often fun. Slapping away enemies that were tough just a handful of minutes ago is always fun, especially when you start hitting 30ft in size.

Knack II nails the platforming, with developer SIE Japan Studio finding a variety of interesting ways to present both 2D and 3D platforming challenges to us through Knack's unique size manipulation tricks; the combat is improved too, frenetic if not ultimately lacking in any real semblance of depth; and, visually, *Knack II* is a real, honest to god treat. As it should happen, the engineering behind this game is pretty damned impressive. The systems and mechanics that tie the core experience together work in tandem and execute wonderfully, while the visual effect of seeing Knack grow and shatter throughout the course of a level – seeing the particles shift and slip away – is actually pretty incredible. It's a real showing of the attention to detail a developer can deliver when harnessing everything the PS4 has going for it. Funny that, in every area Cerny is considered to be an expert in his field, the game shows a strong sense of competency.

Sadly, the writing, the story, the level scenarios, the pacing, and the characters are apocalyptically awful. At its best, monotonous, and at its worst, infuriatingly rote. Once you've played a single chapter of Knack you'll have pretty much seen everything that it has to offer. It is devoid of any real sense or heart – failing to grasp at what made the greats of this genre so legendary to begin with. You get the sense that there's a good game hidden somewhere in *Knack II*, the pieces of it are certainly there but never form together into one cohesive whole. Kids and adults alike are likely to walk away from this wondering if their time could have been better spent elsewhere.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EXCELLENT CONTROL: Despite having no direct control over the camera, *Knack II* does actually control pretty well. It's a testament to the level design that you'll infrequently encounter death from misplaced platforming.

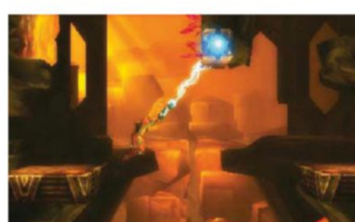
VERDICT 5/10
OCCASIONALLY FUN, BUT AVERAGE 3D ACTION GAME



There's still a real joy to be found in discovering new equipment, unlocking new areas and shortcuts around the world. Sadly, the introduction of a new area scanning ability impacts the thrill of discovery, the fun found in naturally stumbling onto upgrades and new areas unassisted.









EVERYTHING OLD BECOMES NEW AGAIN

Metroid: Samus Returns

It's hard to believe, but it has been a decade since we were last given the opportunity to lose ourselves to the isolating, oppressive atmosphere of a 2D Metroid. While *Metroid: Samus Returns* isn't necessarily *new* in the truest sense of the word, instead billed as a remake of 1991's *Metroid II*, it is in essence a total reimagining; guided by the vision and deft touch of developer Mercury Steam – becoming one of the only studios in the world to have had some degree of creative license over both the Metroid and Castlevania franchises.

Samus Aran's return to her side-scrolling roots is great to see. It serves as a stark reminder of just how wondrous the Metroid games are, particularly in a space that has seen so many attempt to emulate and co-opt the structure and style the series established all those years ago. But it's even more impressive in this instance, when considered within the context of its roots; *Metroid II* was originally constructed around a largely divisive framework, ultimately restricted by the Game Boy's small monochromatic screen and limited processing power. Returning to SR388, Samus is tasked with wiping out all traces of the Metroid from the planet's suffocating subterranean tunnels and, with a limited arsenal of weapons and abilities available from the outset, it's your mission to eradicate 40 of these enemies before the Space Pirates can claim them as their own.

That same basic structure remains in *Samus Returns*. It's a scenario that was never repeated in future entries – for good reason – although Mercury Steam has lovingly updated everything else around it. The game ostensibly feels like a modern release, like it should belong in 2017. Visually, *Samus Returns* is stunning. The cramped graphical stylings of the original Game Boy release have been replaced with beautiful 3D models and environments – it is without question one of the 3DS' best-looking games. But that only serves to highlight how limited this game is by its structure; the maze isn't gear-gated in the traditional sense, but rather restricted by the amount of Metroids you've conquered and collected, and that has an impact on how broad and sprawling the world around you is made to feel.

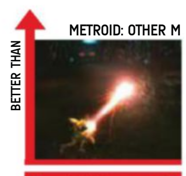
While this is a shame, sweeping improvements made to combat efficiency *almost* make up for it. 2D Metroid games have often felt limited by their control configurations, particularly in your ability to engage enemies in eight directions – in *Samus Returns* Mercury Steam has overhauled this entirely, introducing 360-degree aiming. This plays into combat, puzzle solving and environmental exploration and is a welcome change. Less welcome, though, has been the introduction of a parry mechanic that enables Samus to counter-attack charging enemies, an idea that – while well meaning – removes a lot of the tension from general navigation and interaction in the game.

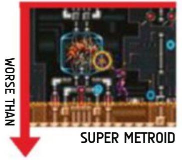
But such small quibbles aside, Mercury Steam has done a fine job here with *Samus Returns*. The studio has taken a 25 year-old release and made it feel new again. While the game is still intrinsically limited by the conceits of the original 1986 release, it's ultimately a return to a much-missed component of the gaming landscape.

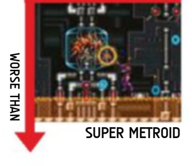
DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Mercury Steam
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — METROID: OTHER M







WORSE THAN — SUPER METROID

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NEW COAT OF PAINT: Mercury Steam hasn't just remade *Metroid II*, it has completely re-imagined it, making it a must-play 3DS release.



Above: *Samus Returns* is one of the easier Metroid experiences, thanks to the inclusion of a parry mechanic to aid in combat and the addition of plentiful save points and teleport points throughout the maze that is SR388.



VERDICT 8/10

IT'S GOOD TO HAVE SAMUS BACK



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ANOTHER YEAR AT THE TOP

Pro Evolution Soccer 2018



After showing steady improvement since 2014, last year's Pro Evolution Soccer (PES) release was of such high quality that it immediately became a contender for best football game of all time. Its class came from its focus on the finer details of passing, shooting and player movement, making for a game of genuine diversity and palpable realism.

To satisfy, then, *PES 2018* need only continue and tweak the structure laid out by its predecessor. A reinvention of the wheel is not needed or wanted this season. For the most part, this is a game of continuation. Look down the list of *PES 2018*'s features and you're met with tweaks of *PES 2017*'s ideas as opposed to entirely new in-game elements.

Real Touch+, for instance, improves on last season's 'Real Touch' addition in that quality first touches of the ball designed to trick opposing defenders and increase your chances of making space for yourself incorporate your whole body. Rather than just using your feet to bring the ball under control in difficult situations, you now see players using their heads, chest, shoulder, thighs, hips and whatever else as a means to retain possession.

It sounds like a minor alteration, but the increase in surface area a player has at their disposal is significant and gives you much more opportunity when it comes to using the ball and dictating the pace of play.

Combine this with improved dribbling that provides a much greater sense of one-to-one feedback between your analogue stick movements and your player's feet and you've a football game that – more than any other in history – gives you a sense of total control. You might make a bad decision, but that bad decision still represents your control over the action. Whether things go right or wrong for you, it's still your fault.

Goalkeepers are a disappointment following the significant improvement seen in *PES 2017*, with fumbles of weak shots now more commonly being knocked straight back into the danger area. This is likely due to the fact that Real Touch+ and the improvements to dribbling provide more ways to create chances and, therefore, keepers have to deal with more shots. More shots means more instances of awkward saves. This is something we'll be keeping an eye on next year.

You can limit the degree to which keepers influence the result by teaming up with quality partners in the new Online Co-op mode. Matches can be played in 2v2 or 3v3 and it's here that *PES 2018* really comes into its own on a strategic level. The AI does a decent job at, for example, organising your defence or making runs into the box with attackers, but it's no substitute for the kind of total manual control available when multiple human players are involved.

The best games we've had have been in Online Co-op and, while the staple offline Master League option continues to be impressive, it's here that we'll be spending most of our time. And, given how good *PES 2018*'s core gameplay is, 'most of our time' means a lot of our time.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

REAL NAMES: PES has long suffered from a lack of official licenses, and this year's edition is no exception. Man Blue (Man City) in a Champions League final against MD White (Real Madrid) does, to an extent, limit the spectacle.

BETTER THAN

PES 2017



AS GOOD AS

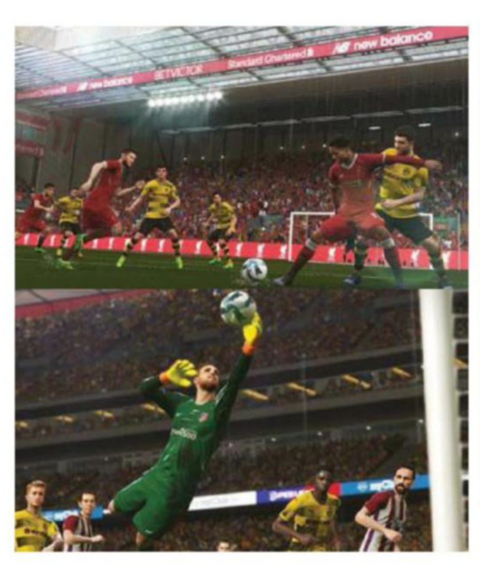


FIFA 15



VERDICT 9/10

BUILDS ON LAST YEAR'S GAME AND IMPRESSES AGAIN





Left: Goalkeepers often make spectacular-looking saves, but they just as often make a mess of shots that should be straightforward. The quality of keepers is genuinely disappointing, although not so devastating that the whole experience is ruined.

LOOK AT THE BIRDIE

Everybody's Golf

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Clap Hanz, SIE Japan Studio
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-20 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

There's something very special about sinking a chip shot from the fringe of the green. Something even better about doing it from a bunker. Even when there's a whirlwind in the cup pulling the ball towards it, it still feels pretty good and having your PS4 controller make a chirpy ball landing in a cup sound certainly helps. This is the pure joy of playing *Everybody's Golf*, it's just a shame it's intercut with such a slog.

All of the simplicity of *Everybody's Golf* remains intact, much as it ever has since the series began 20 years ago. This has always been a deeply approachable, fun-loving golf experience and that remains as true as ever. What this new PS4 version offers is some deeper progression systems, a character creation suite with masses of depth, some gorgeous course design and crisp 4K and HDR upgrades for those who can enjoy them.

The one other key element that's been added that we found somewhat less enjoyable is the slow grind of gradually unlocking courses and items in the game. You see, the only way to unlock courses is to go up through the ranks as a golfer and the only way to do that is to win tournaments. But with one course open to you at the lower tiers, you have to grind your way through again and again before you really feel as if you're making progress. We wouldn't normally expect a golf game to have the kind of slow, methodical opening that would be more regularly associated with a Japanese RPG. Even unlocking the ability to drive a golf kart, swim and fish requires some grinding to get there.

The moment to moment progression through *Everybody's Golf*, the incremental improvement you see with every club as you use each more and more, work really well. At times it seems like every time you strike the ball on a new hole the game is telling you that you've improved on your personal best, which is very satisfying. It's just that between the fun it can wear you down. And perhaps the less said about the cliché and stereotyped supporting cast the better.

BETTER THAN: RORY MCILROY PGA TOUR



AS GOOD AS: MARIO GOLF: WORLD TOUR



Above: Taking the game online you can test yourself against the daily leaderboards or get involved in the Turf War, a Red versus Blue multiplayer experience where you play as many holes as you can within the time limit and earn points for your team by doing so.

VERDICT 7/10
APPROACHABLE GAMEPLAY, OBSTRUCTIONIST SYSTEMS

SHORT AND TO THE MATCH POINT

Windjammers

If you're of a certain generation then *Windjammers* is going to feel like an essential purchase. If you spent most of your pocket money in arcades or got your SNES with a copy of *Street Fighter II*, if you whiled away hours playing tennis games, then this will feel very familiar indeed. Originally being a Neo Geo release, *Windjammers* didn't get the airing it deserved and yet somehow it doesn't feel like it's aged all that much.

DotEmu has created a fantastically faithful remake of the original experience, albeit with the kind of tight, responsive controls on PS4 that we would demand in the modern era. The basic tenets of the gameplay, throwing a frisbee-type object trying to hit the wall of point-scoring goals behind your opponent remains exactly the same. It still feels like a mix of air hockey, volleyball and tennis. The music is the same. The bonus mini-games are the same. And there are the same six characters.

What's remarkable is that the gameplay feels as intense as ever. Playing against the AI isn't necessarily going to give you much to work with – although it offers some challenge on Hard – but playing against a friend, preferably side by side, is just as thrilling as anything you could get from *FIFA* or *Street Fighter V*.

It's lacking some of the bells, whistles and trappings of modern gaming, for sure. Beyond the arcade solo structure and versus competition, it doesn't have much more to offer anyone hungry for a varied gaming diet. Its roster is small, the gameplay permutations have their limits and might begin to feel repetitive, but as with any sports-adjacent experience, it's not the limits of the play that are important so much as the drive to win and whether the game has enough about it to inspire competition and create dramatic events. In managing to stay so true to the original formula, DotEmu has achieved that feat. If it had just managed to add a little more depth to this *Windjammers* update, it might have made something better than this nostalgic celebration.

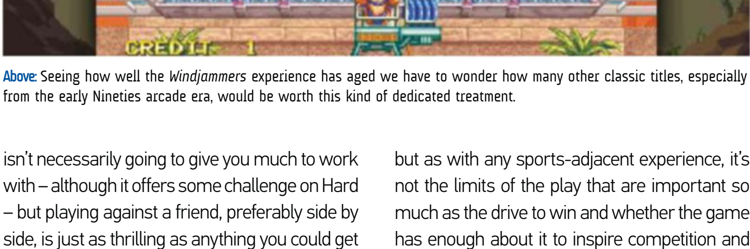
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: DotEmu
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: DISC JAM

WORSE THAN: PYRE





Above: Seeing how well the *Windjammers* experience has aged we have to wonder how many other classic titles, especially from the early Nineties arcade era, would be worth this kind of dedicated treatment.



VERDICT 6/10
A CLASSIC GEM, NICELY RESURRECTED

STICK 'EM WITH THE POINTY END

Nidhogg 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Messhof
DEVELOPER: Messhof
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: TOWERFALL: ASCENSION

WORSE THAN: NIDHOGG

The premise of *Nidhogg* is simple. Your character has to get to the other side of the stage, past several screens to win. In your way is another character, with the same aim. With only two buttons, Jump and Stab. The formula for *Nidhogg*'s success was devilishly simple, and made the game a multiplayer masterpiece. *Nidhogg 2* retains the same formula as before, but aims to shake it up with a brand-new lick of paint, new weapons and different stages.

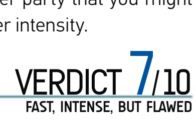
The main thing that differentiates *Nidhogg 2* is it's flashy new pixel-art style. The original title was basic, with ethereal backdrops and ambient music in the background. *Nidhogg 2* fleshes this out, with varying results. The detailed style of the art makes the visuals a treat to look at when still. However, during a match, it proved to be more than a little bit detrimental due to being distracted by the flashiness of each stage.

Sporting Arcade, Multiplayer and Online modes, *Nidhogg 2* is the full multiplayer package. Facing off with another player is exhilarating, with its 'easy to learn, difficult to master' mantra, you'll find yourself hooked on it's online modes and local multiplayer. Free from the simple Rapier, you now you have the option of spawning with a Dagger, Longsword or Bow, and each of them significantly changes the way you play the game.

When squaring up to a player, you'll find yourself trying to disarm them, the Rapier has a simple parry that you can execute just by flicking it up or down on the D-Pad, with heavier weapons such as the Longsword being able to easily parry lighter weapons. The daggers also make for more acute gameplay due to the length of the weapon, and can make for some incredibly tense situations. All of these additions deepen the *Nidhogg 2* experience, and allow for even more vivid matches. However, we found that the Bow can stifle the pace and intensity of the game, with a long wind-up to shoot an arrow. The Bow becomes frustrating to use in a high-speed, high stakes match. The weapon breaks the flow of the game and doesn't feel much fun to use.

The eight new stages also make for another great addition to *Nidhogg 2*'s arsenal. You're able to find yourself on everything from multi-levelled platforms to a tight corridor, which can make for some very intense action. If it were not for the overwhelming visual style of the game, they'd be very near to perfect.

Nidhogg 2 manages to retain the core of the original game, while also expanding upon, but takes a few stumbles on the way. Nevertheless, it will become a great part of any local-multiplayer party that you might have due to its sheer intensity.



VERDICT 7/10
FAST, INTENSE, BUT FLAWED

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GRIPPING GAMEPLAY: *Nidhogg 2*'s push-pull nature makes it an absolute blast to play, although it can make you a bit sweaty due to the close quarters nature and intensity of its action.

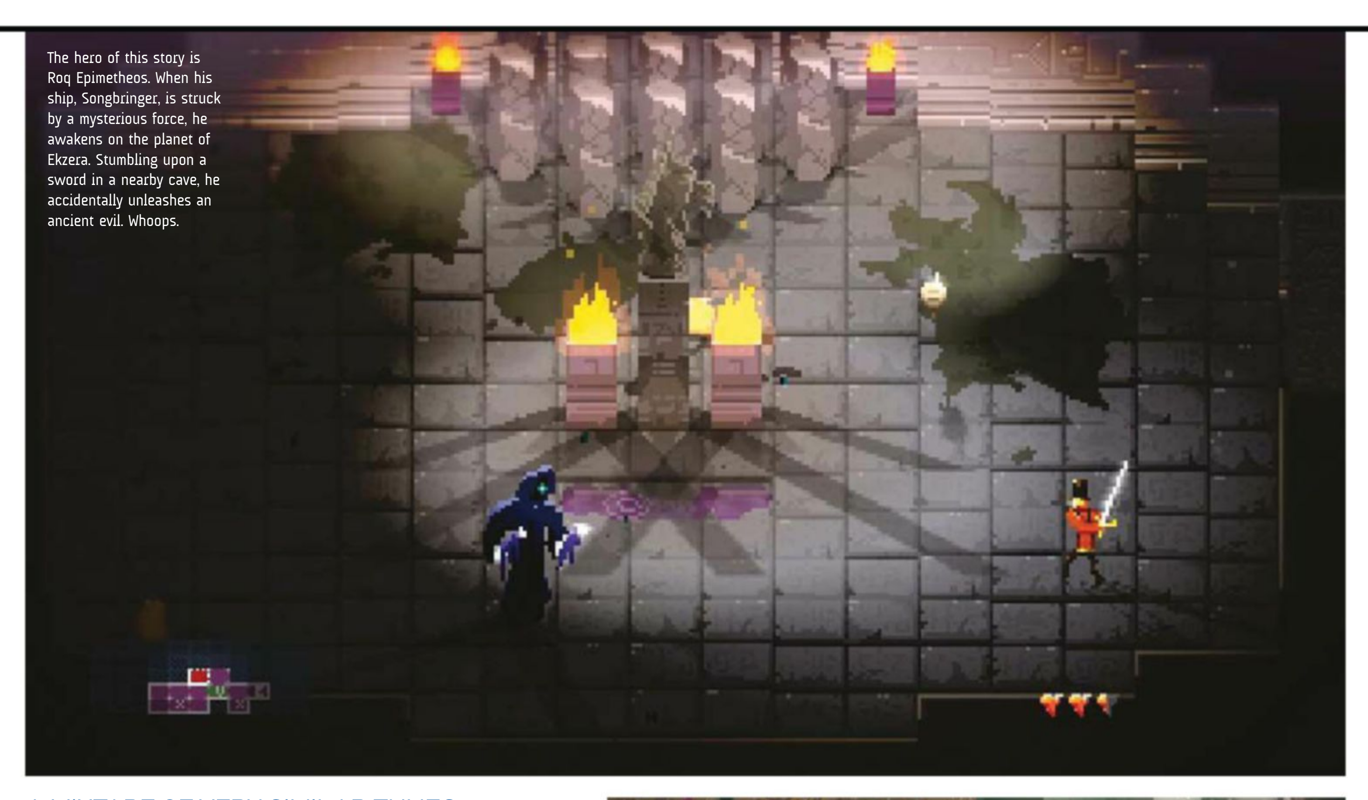


Above: When you win a match, your character immediately gets gobbled up by a giant Nidhogg.





Above: Sometimes, stage effects can get a little bit overwhelming on the eyes.



The hero of this story is Roq Epimetheos. When his ship, Songbringer, is struck by a mysterious force, he awakens on the planet of Ekzera. Stumbling upon a sword in a nearby cave, he accidentally unleashes an ancient evil. Whoops.

A MIXTAPE OF VERY SIMILAR TUNES

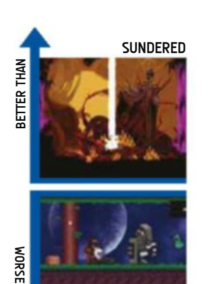
Songbringer

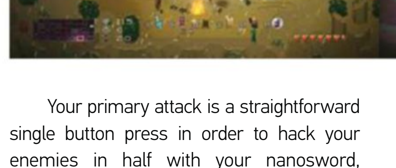
Beneath *Songbringer*'s distinctly retro stylings is a game with more depth than its simple exterior suggests. This offbeat adventure offers a procedurally generated experience that presents a distinctly different layout with every playthrough. While it's permeated with facets pulled straight from of the original *Zelda*, to pass this off as a mere modern rehash of classic Hyrule excursions would be doing it a great disservice.

Songbringer's narrative blend of intrigue and understated humour houses its own commendable measure of unique and often zany gameplay ideas – the most curious of these occurring right at the game's outset. In order to start an adventure, you're required to choose a six-letter word that generates an individual hub world and dungeons. In a feat that can best be described as sheer technical wizardry, that same word will always produce the same planet, offering players a chance to work together – even across different platforms – to share discoveries of the world's various hidden secrets. It's an intriguing idea that makes the prospect of multiple playthroughs an exciting one, albeit one that's unfortunately hampered by *Songbringer*'s rudimentary systems that struggle to expand the intrigue much further than the initial playthrough.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Wizard Fu Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Your primary attack is a straightforward single button press in order to hack your enemies in half with your nanosword, however, it's the odd array of items at your disposal that provide the most enjoyment. A top hat boomerang, highly destructive bombs, and cabbages that are equipped with psychedelic properties reinforce the game's charmingly bizarre nature and offer a welcome and enjoyable alternative to your simple sword swinging.

The enemies are just as unorthodox; our world saw us cleaving everything from purple elephants to demonic goat-headed entities. There is no levelling system and nil experience granted for battling the game's weird and wonderful foes. Instead, your robot sidekick, Jib, can scan fallen foes for supplies, as well as diamonds to purchase helpful items from shops. The discovery of new items and passive abilities is where the sense progression comes into play. Stumbling upon a pair of unassuming boots in a cave can increase your movement speed, while cubes containing electricity and ice can be combined with weapon attacks or your companion, for greater damage and elemental effects.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MODERN RETRO: *Songbringer* offers an absorbing blend of old and new. Musty dungeons are fitted with keycard activated doors, for example.

BOLT BUDDY: Local co-op allows a second player to take control of Roq's faithful robot companion, Jib.

The overworld gives you access to various randomised dungeons, each of which can be carried out in any order, as and when you please. Some are more puzzle and exploration based, tasking you with moving pillars and locating switches in order to open the way forward, while others are considerably more combat heavy.

The combination of approaches offers gameplay that's initially engrossing. But a lack of emerging ideas and differing enemy types robs latter sections of that same excitement. While it's massively enjoyable, more variation would have made this something truly special.

VERDICT 7/10

RETRO ADVENTURE WITH SOME QUIRKY NEW IDEAS

ALL PROBLEMS LEAD BACK TO ASIMOV

Subsurface Circular

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Mike Bithell Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

VA-11 HALL-A





STORIES UNTOLD

WORSE THAN

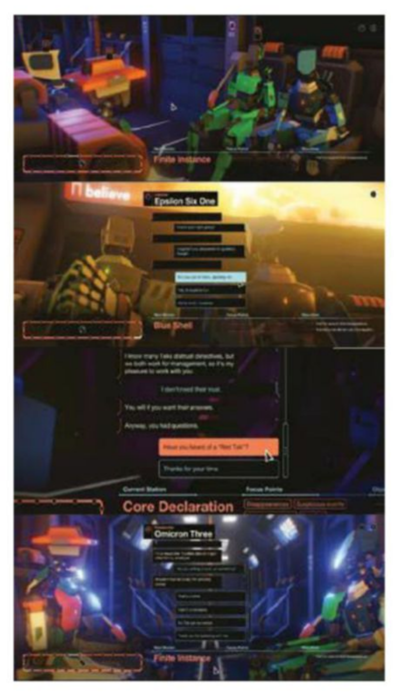
***Subsurface Circular* is a game that respects your intelligence and, perhaps more importantly, your time.** From Mike Bithell, creator of *Thomas Was Alone* and *Volume*, comes this elegant new text adventure; a short and contemplative experience that is designed to be played in one sitting but chewed over for hours after.

Set in the infinite loop of an underground transit system – designed to ferry service robots from destination to destination in a futuristic city – you are cast as a robotic detective whose job is to conduct investigations from a single seat in a sterilised carriage. It's from here that you investigate a number of strange goings-on in the city, gaining leads and insights into the mysteries and politics of a wider world that you'll never see – all of this achieved by interacting with the other mechanised passengers that are free to come and go around you. You'll do this through intuitive, branching conversation trees; Bithell has subverted the typical presentation of such a mechanic and the result makes an impression.

As a game, *Subsurface Circular* is a linear short-form mystery, where you get as much out of it as you bring to it. It may be visually minimalist in its presentation and style, but the content is anything but. It isn't afraid to reflect on aspects of modern politics and unchecked advances in robotics, asking us to question how sustainable workforces are likely to be in an age of increasing automation, while putting us in a position to ponder the potential conflict of morals and ethics this is likely to arise – the mechanised denizens of this world are quick to, for example, question why the laws that dictate their actions were written before they even existed. What's impressive is that Bithell achieves all of this without shoving it down your throat. *Subsurface Circular* is a smart experience that only occasionally stumbles, well-paced and ambitious; for a few hours of your time, you'll find a game here that revels in the mastery of pure and succinct storytelling.



A MEANINGFUL AND MEMORABLE TEXT-ADVENTURE



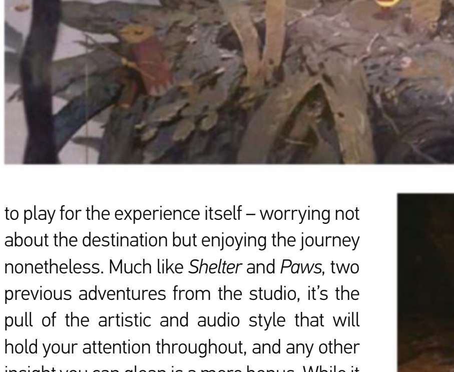
Above: With all dialogue presented as text, there's a lot of emphasis placed on the sublime music of Dan Le Sac and sound design of Chris Randle. It provides a fantastic compliment to Bithell's writing and visual framing.

LIVING IN COLOUR

Tiny Echo

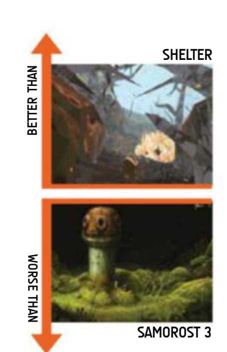
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Might And Delight
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.25
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



It's actually kind of amazing; how *Tiny Echo* is able to communicate an entire world without ever saying a word. Mesmerising and strange, melancholic and beautiful, this latest release from developer Might And Delight is essentially a wordless point-and-click adventure that has you traversing through a living painting.

As Emi, a postal courier in an ethereal world, you are tasked with delivering messages to spirits, solving simple puzzles, and investigating the mysteries of the realm around you. It's elegant and quiet, a short and enveloping release you play to experience its tone and ethereal hold over you as much as anything else. Combined with a beautiful soundtrack, composed by Mount West, *Tiny Echo* succeeds as an emotionally driven game even if its intention and message is never made expressly clear. As a point-and-click it's certainly simple, and you won't likely find yourself challenged in any real meaningful manner, but *Tiny Echo* is something you'll want to play for the experience itself – worrying not about the destination but enjoying the journey nonetheless. Much like *Shelter* and *Paws*, two previous adventures from the studio, it's the pull of the artistic and audio style that will hold your attention throughout, and any other insight you can glean is a mere bonus. While it can often feel as if little is happening, *Tiny Echo* does have a mesmerising quality to it. While it may be experimental and small, it also succeeds in making you feel as if you are part of a wider world.

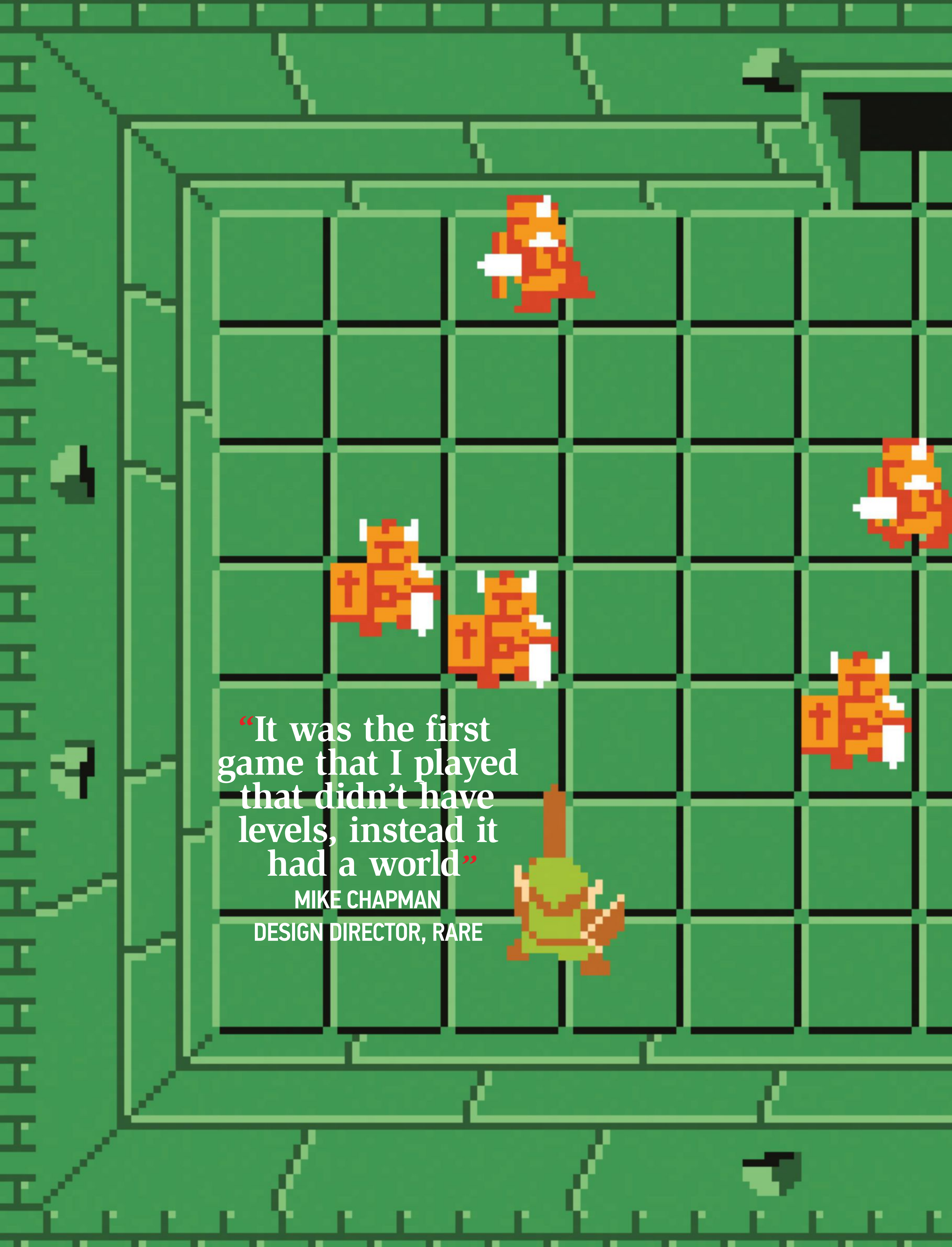


VERDICT 7/10

A STRANGE AND HAUNTINGLY BEAUTIFUL ADVENTURE

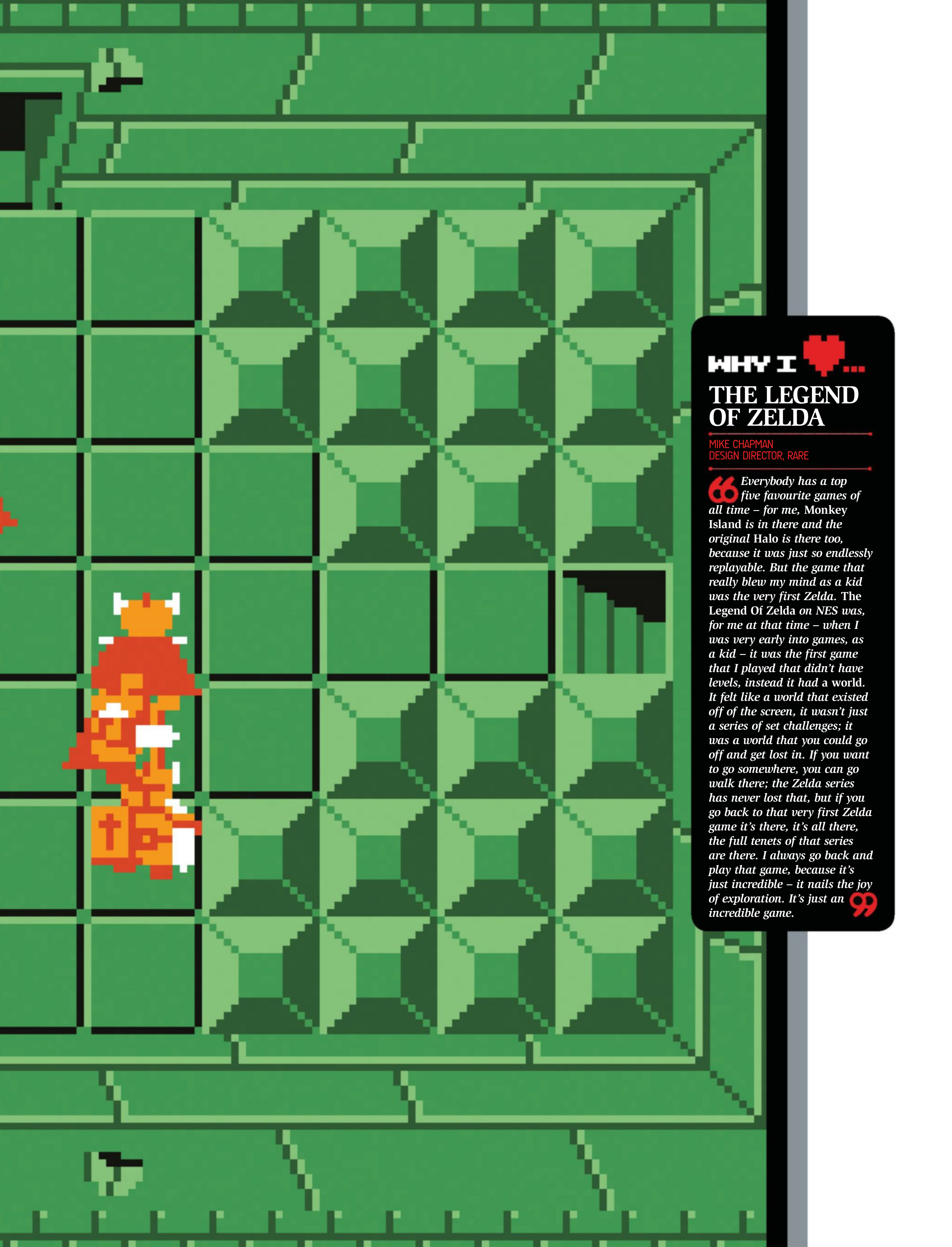


Above: Much like Might And Delight's previous work, *Tiny Echo* has a unique visual and audio presentation. It feels as if you are moving through a living painting, and is an experience that certainly benefits from headphones and a solid play session.



"It was the first game that I played that didn't have levels, instead it had a world"

MIKE CHAPMAN
DESIGN DIRECTOR, RARE



WHY I ♥...

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

MIKE CHAPMAN
DESIGN DIRECTOR, RARE

Everybody has a top five favourite games of all time – for me, Monkey Island *is in there and the original* Halo *is there too, because it was just so endlessly replayable. But the game that really blew my mind as a kid was the very first Zelda.* The Legend Of Zelda *on NES was, for me at that time – when I was very early into games, as a kid – it was the first game that I played that didn't have levels, instead it had* a world. *It felt like a world that existed off of the screen, it wasn't just a series of set challenges; it was a world that you could go off and get lost in. If you want to go somewhere, you can go walk there; the Zelda series has never lost that, but if you go back to that very first Zelda game it's there, it's all there, the full tenets of that series are there. I always go back and play that game, because it's just incredible – it nails the joy of exploration. It's just an incredible game.*

RETRO

NO.192



DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro and much more on our dedicated forum **forum.gamestm.co.uk**

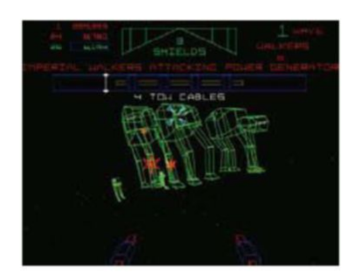
THE RETRO GUIDE TO…

ATARI GAMES

It may have been passed from pillar to post after the sale of Atari Inc, but that didn't stop Atari Games' developers from making some great arcade games…

ALTHOUGH ATARI GAMES was formed in 1984, its legacy stretches back further as it began as the arcade division of Atari, Inc. Warner Communications sold the Atari consumer division of Atari, Inc. to Jack Tramiel in 1984 but kept its arcade division and renamed it Atari Games. A controlling interest in Atari Games was later sold to Namco in 1985, but changed hands again in 1986 after a group of Atari employees bought back Namco's share. By 1997 the company had branched out to create cartridges for the NES, publishing them under a new Tengen label, but it soon fell foul of Nintendo due to disputes over *Tetris* and Atari's circumvention of Nintendo's lock-out chip. Time Warner (created by Warner Communication merging with Time, Inc.) bought a controlling interest in 1993, but then sold the division in 1996 to WMS Industries. It was then renamed Midway Games West, but was eventually disbanded in 2003. Phew…





STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1985

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Interestingly, *Empire* arrived one year after *Return Of The Jedi* in the arcades and was somewhat disappointing. Returning to the vector-based visuals of Atari Inc's original *Star Wars* smash – it was available as a conversion kit – *Empire* had you shooting Imperial Probe Droids and TIE-Fighters, downing AT-ATs and navigating an asteroid field. It was decent enough, but wasn't a patch on *Star Wars*.





MARBLE MADNESS 1984

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Mark Cerny was still in his teens when he designed and co-programmed his fast-paced isometric arcade hit. Controlling a marble with a trackball, you must guide it through the devilishly designed courses as quickly as possible while avoiding the many enemies and hazards that are found along the way. There are only six courses, but they will take ages to master and the difficulty curve is just right so you're always going back for one more game. Instantly distinctive thanks to its isometric, Escher-styled visuals, *Marble Madness* was a huge success and found equal acclaim on home systems, appearing on everything from the Spectrum to the Game Gear.



INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM 1985

ARCADE, VARIOUS

This fun arcade romp is based around three key sequences from the film. Firstly, you have to free a set number of children by whipping their cages open (you can also use your whip to take out the Thuggee guards that harass you and swing across chasms). You then take part in a frantic minecart chase, before moving on to retrieve the coveted Sankara Stones.

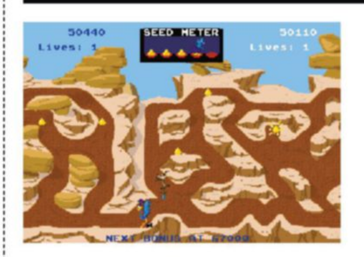




GAUNTLET 1985

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Gauntlet's design is so similar to earlier 8-bit game *Dandy*, its creator, John Palevich, threatened a lawsuit against the company, which was eventually settled out of court. Lawsuits aside, Ed Logg's arcade game is still a highly engaging bash-a-thon, allowing up to four players to choose four unique characters: an Elf, Wizard, Barbarian and Valkyrie, and explore the labyrinth-like dungeons in search of the exit to the next stage. Numerous deadly monsters inhabit the dungeon, ranging from rock-throwing lobbers to fire-breathing demons and even Death himself lurks on certain levels. Time is also a danger as you lose health with each passing second, meaning much coin feeding if you ever hope to reach the later stages. A sequel was released in 1986, which added numerous refinements, including the ability to play with multiple versions of the same hero.





ROAD RUNNER 1985

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Wile E. Coyote has far more success in Atari's game than he ever managed in the cartoons. Playing as Road Runner you must dash around the tightly designed levels stopping to pick at seeds and avoiding Wile E.'s numerous attempts to catch you. It's surprisingly tough, with the devious canine using everything from rocket boots to giant springs to capture you.

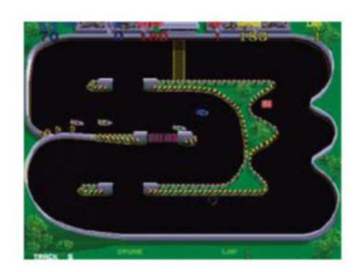




PAPERBOY 1985

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ This classic Atari hit was notable for its distinctive handlebar controls and for appearing as a challenge on the popular Eighties kids quiz show, *First Class*. Playing as the titular hero, you must deliver papers to your customers, while causing as much damage to non-subscribers and then enjoy a quick circuit of the local BMX course. *Paperboy*'s popularity saw it converted to numerous home systems, even popping up in *Lego Dimensions*. Sadly, the 1991 sequel is absolute rubbish.





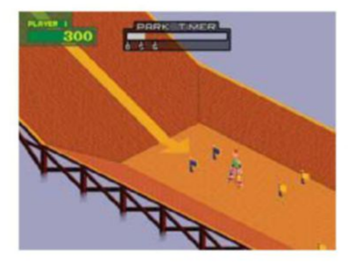
SUPER SPRINT 1986

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ Atari created several top-down racers after the 1974 release of *Gran Trak 10*, with *Super Sprint* being one of the most popular. Instantly recognisable thanks to its three prominent steering wheels, players must navigate eight different circuits and beat their rivals to the finishing post. Picking up wrenches enables cars to be customised between races, but hazards, such as oil spills or tornados, will cause your car to spin out of control. An update, *Championship Sprint*, was released later the same year.

INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE THANKS TO ITS THREE PROMINENT STEERING WHEELS, PLAYERS MUST NAVIGATE EIGHT DIFFERENT CIRCUITS AND BEAT THEIR RIVALS





720 1986

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ With the popularity of skateboarding in the late Seventies and Eighties it was perhaps inevitable that Atari would make an arcade game based around the popular pastime. Set in a skate park, you must move around, spending tickets so you can compete in four events: Jump, Slalom, Downhill and Ramp. You earn tickets by scoring points, but you only have a set amount of time to do so as you're soon chased by a very angry swarm of killer bees. This was another Atari game to appear on First Class.

XYBOTS 1987

ATARI, VARIOUS



■ After completing *Gauntlet II*, Ed Logg began working on this highly inventive maze game that dabbled with a 3D playing field. Each level is essentially a robot-filled maze that needs to be navigated and they get increasingly more convoluted the further you progress. You not only have full control over your character's movement, but can also manually rotate the playing area, which allows you to team up on enemy robots extremely effectively when playing with a second player. The control system is admittedly a little fiddly, but the well-designed stages, hidden secrets and useful supply shop mean the game never gets boring. It was ported to home systems with varying degrees of success. The Lynx version is particularly commendable.

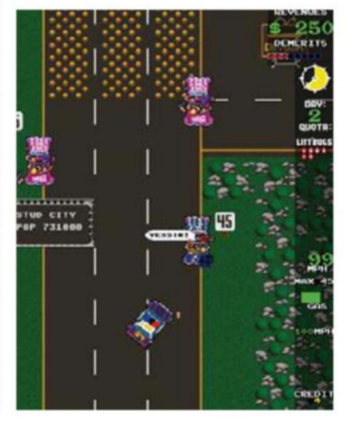


EACH LEVEL IS ESSENTIALLY A ROBOT-FILLED MAZE THAT NEEDS TO BE NAVIGATED AND THEY GET INCREASINGLY MORE CONVOLUTED THE FURTHER YOU PROGRESS

A.P.B. 1987

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ This highly entertaining game casts you as a rookie police officer who must make a set amount of arrests each day without receiving too many demerits. Played from an overhead view, lawbreakers must be apprehended by pulling as close to them as possible and activating your siren (you'll need to use it multiple times on particularly difficult adversaries). While the game is full of humour and offers a surprising amount of exploration it's perhaps a little too complicated for its own good.





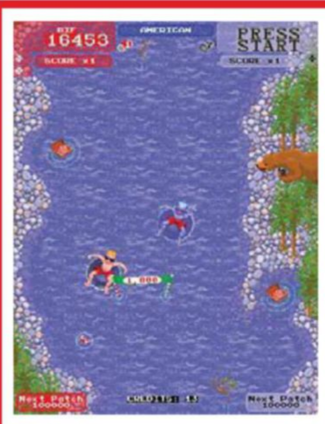




ROAD BLASTERS 1987

ARCADE, VARIOUS

This apocalyptic-based racing game is quite unusual because it's fuel, not time that you're up against. The other road users will do everything they can to blast you off the road and you need to retaliate by blasting them to pieces and making good use of the powerful weapons that occasionally get dropped off by an overhead friendly craft. Fuel can be extended by collecting red and green globes and passing the check and rally points, but that's easier said than done with all the carnage taking place around you.





TOOBIN' 1988

ARCADE, VARIOUS

This innovative spin on the racing genre saw you hurtling down 15 different rivers on a rubber tube in a desperate attempt to reach the end before your opponent. While several of the rivers are based on real life locations, such as the Amazon and Nile, just as many are fantastical, including a journey through a Jurassic timezone and a dangerous jaunt along the River Styx. Players can jostle each other into hazards in an attempt to burst each other's tubes, while various themed enemies will also be taking pot shots. The control system is a little troublesome at first but *Toobin'* is definitely worth sticking with.

TETRIS 1988

ARCADE, VARIOUS



Tetris' phenomenal success across the world meant it was only a matter of time before a company snapped up the arcade rights. Ed Logg fell in love with the game after seeing it on the Atari ST and convinced Atari to acquire the rights, allowing him to recreate the game from scratch, as opposed to simply porting it. It's a very good version, although the ability to rotate blocks in only one direction is rather annoying. It makes up for this oversight with an excellent simultaneous multiplayer mode, which makes for far more competitive gaming. Ed also made a NES version, but 268,000 cartridges were recalled and destroyed, as publisher Tengen didn't have a licence to sell it on home consoles.



A ROUND WITH JOHN SALWITZ

The Paperboy coder revisits his arcade classic

When did you realise that *Paperboy* was going to be popular?

The first moment really was when we were still making the game and other people in the company began playing the game in our lab. At Atari, this is your first good indication that you had a winner. Dave Ralston and myself would be taking notes as they played and then make adjustments afterwards. It was a great system that worked really well. Later, this belief was confirmed in field tests, which of course was wonderful to observe.

So was Atari a great place to work?

Yes, at Atari you were given the opportunity to create original titles and were not bound to stay with the sequels of those titles. This was a great strength and weakness of Atari as it gave game-makers an incredible opportunity to explore and create, but also meant that we may have not gotten as much as we could out of our IP. Companies like EA – where I work now – are incredibly good at leveraging existing IP. But, of course, that means that people tend to stay on the same franchises for a lot longer. Sometimes, a lot longer than they really want to.

Did you apply any of your own paperboy experience when making the game?

[Laughs] What a great question. I wasn't much of a paperboy growing up. I know Dave Ralston, who came up with the idea of the game, was a paperboy when he was younger, but I'm pretty sure nothing in it is based on any of his real-life experiences.

Why did it take so long?

You have to remember that, back in 1982/1983, *Paperboy* was pretty much cutting edge technology. While it eventually used the Atari System 2 [arcade board] it hadn't been created at the time. So, we were dealing with a new hardware, a new (large) design and lots of software, art, animation, music and so forth. We were treading new ground, which is part of the reason why developing *Paperboy* was so exciting.

What was the trickiest aspect about working on *Paperboy*?

It was mainly the technology side that presented problems. From an engineering perspective, the biggest problem was the size and the complexity of the software. Given the time, this was a fairly large coding project and just keeping it running and performing was challenging.

How important was Dave Ralston to *Paperboy*'s success?

Amazingly important, the game would not have happened without Dave's strength and vision. It was Dave that came up with the original idea [he was the gameplay designer] and it was Dave that did all the amazingly detailed isometric visuals. At one stage it looked like *Paperboy* might even get cancelled, but Dave's vision and determination helped ensure it was finished.

Tell us an interesting *Paperboy* anecdote?

Funnily enough, last year I was sitting down in a restaurant with my wife and daughter. As we were eating our meal I heard a couple behind us, probably in their 30s and out on a first date. The man was asking the woman if she played any games and when she said 'not really' he started going on about Nintendo and how he loved *Paperboy*. After they had finished their meal I asked him about *Paperboy* and if he has ever played the arcade version and he said 'yes'. My daughter told me I should I have told him I made it, but it was just nice hearing he was so excited about it.



THAT'S SOME HARD CODIN'

Max Behensky revisits Hard Drivin'

Tell us about the genesis of *Hard Drivin'*.

In 1982, some friends of mine and I started work at the Atari Cambridge Research Lab. Marvin Minsky had come up with the idea for a 'force feedback' joystick. I thought that was really cool, and so I got together with Doug and Peter Milliken, and we built one. The prototype was a success, and it got me thinking about other force feedback game controls. Doug's dad, Bill, had done some of the pioneering work on mathematical analysis of car handling, and we were both motor heads. We decided to come up with a force feedback steering wheel that could give accurate control to a driving game. We built a prototype, and took a trip out to California to Atari to show these controls around. I met Rick Moncrief – he wanted to develop a driving simulator, and our force feedback steering wheel was perfect for that.

What happened when Atari's consumer division was sold?

Atari got broken up, and the Cambridge lab closed down. In the spring of 1985, Rick gave me a job with his new Applied Research group to work on developing a driving simulator. The force feedback controls came first. Next, I worked on the physical model of car handling with the assistance of Doug Milliken and his dad. We were waiting on another group at Atari to develop a 3D polygon display system, but since it kept getting delayed, we decided to roll our own.

How much control did you have over the project?

I was the lead software engineer and game designer, although all the members of our group had input into all the aspects of game design, software design, and hardware design. It is important to realise that *Hard Drivin'* started life as a driver training simulator. Rick wanted to use accurate physics, good quality audio, and force feedback controls to provide a system to teach students how to drive. We spent from 1985 through early 1988 developing the hardware and software to do this.

When did *Hard Drivin'* become a fully-fledged game?

It became obvious to us that Atari didn't have the marketing resources to sell anything other than videogames at that point. Also, Atari was struggling financially and we figured we had better come up with a game or we might be out of a job. We took the building blocks of our driving simulator, added the speed track and stunt track – which could really take advantage of accurate physics – and *Hard Drivin'* was born. The tracks had no relationship to real-world courses, although the open drawbridge was inspired by the scene at the beginning of *The Blues Brothers* movie!

HARD DRIVIN' 1989

ARCADE, VARIOUS



■ There was nothing quite like Atari's simulator when it arrived in 1989. It was one of the first arcade driving games to feature 3D polygon environments – Namco's *Winning Run* just pipped it to the post – and it was also one of the first to offer a realistic driving experience. Designed to look like a Ferrari, *Hard Drivin'*s cabinet features a realistic gearbox and even an ignition key that is used to start your car. The first-person viewpoint immerses you fully, allowing you to concentrate on navigating the treacherous stunt course that Atari had created by making full use of the gear stick to tackle the many tricky corners and jumps. It was ported to numerous home systems at the time, but it's state-of-the-art visuals were extremely hard to recreate, meaning many versions felt like poor comparisons. A sequel, *Race Drivin'*, was released in 1990, but two further projects failed to materialise.





ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE ROBOT MONSTERS 1989

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ Inspired by old Hollywood B-Movies, *Escape* is a fantastic isometric shooter that has you navigating a research facility and saving as many humans as possible. Gems are scattered around the stages, which improve your firepower when collected, and many stages take place across multiple levels. Completing each stage has you reaching the next by steering your spaceship through a gauntlet of incoming obstacles. While it appeared on numerous home computers, console owners weren't so lucky.

KLAX 1989

ARCADE, VARIOUS



■ This refreshing puzzler ended up getting ported to a large number of home systems, including the then ancient Atari 2600. Tiles continually roll down an escalator and you must use a small holder to catch them. You can only manage to store five tiles at a time, so you can either throw them back onto the escalator or dump them in your 5x5 bin. Get three or more of the same coloured tiles together, either horizontally, vertically or diagonally and you score a Klax. While it's great fun on its own, it becomes even more entertaining when played against another player.



S.T.U.N. RUNNER 1989

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ This was another big Atari game that proved there was still a big gulf between the arcade and home systems of the time. Taking part in a stylistic futuristic setting, *S.T.U.N. Runner* requires you to race through tunnels as quickly as possible, often using the ceilings to avoid enemies and hazards. Sadly, the game's exhilarating sensation of speed translated poorly to home systems, with only the Lynx conversion truly capturing the arcade's spirit.

PIT-FIGHTER 1990

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ We all know that *Pit-Fighter* is a terrible game, but it remains an important one as it helped herald in an all-new wave of digitised fighting games that used real actors. There are three playable characters: Buzz, Ty and Kato, each with the unique fighting styles, but the gameplay is let down by stilted animation and poor collision detection. Atari tried its hand at the genre again in 1992 with the rather atrocious *Guardians Of The Hood*.



RAMPART 1990

ARCADE, VARIOUS

This intriguing puzzle-cum-strategy game was created by Dave Ralston who also oversaw *Paperboy*. The idea is to place cannons and use them to stop an incoming wave of ships. You're then given a small amount of time to rebuild your fortifications so you can hopefully add additional cannons and continue your assault. As entertaining as *Rampart* is against the computer, it really comes into its own when two additional players enter the fray. The numerous home conversions are decent, but typically cater for just two players.

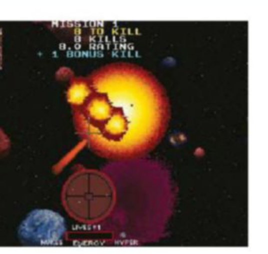


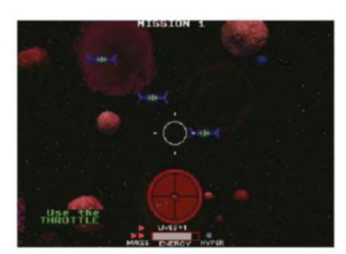


STEEL TALONS 1991

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Atari's helicopter blaster was certainly an imposing game to look at, but it was tough to master. There are a large number of different controls to manage, which take a fair while to get to grips with. Once you do master them you'll discover Atari's game to be surprisingly simplistic, being a straightforward blaster that has very little going for it beyond its impressive – for the time – visuals. *Steel Talons* can be played co-operatively, which makes the 19 available missions far more enjoyable to play through. Alternatively, you can take on a friend and vie for mastery of the skies.





SPACE LORDS 1992

ARCADE

The mid-Nineties saw Atari hit something of a creative stumbling block, with many of its games failing to capture the creativity of the company's earlier years. One such example is this extremely generic blaster that features great-looking visuals, but very little else. It sports a variety of gameplay modes, including a death match mode that supports up to four players, but it does very little to hide the dull blasting.

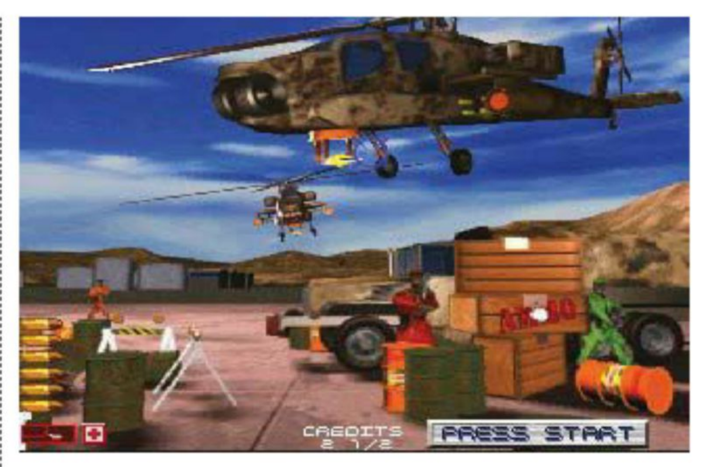




PRIMAL RAGE 1994

ARCADE, VARIOUS

By their very nature, dinosaurs should make anything they appear in awesome, but that wasn't the case for Atari's prehistoric brawler. Taking control of one of several prehistoric beasts, the aim is to bite and claw your opponent into a bloody pulp as quickly as possible. Being able to eat humans to regain health is a neat touch – but hardly original – and there are some silly special moves, but like many digitised fighters, it's let down by stilted animation.



AREA 51 1995

ARCADE, VARIOUS

After losing many key members to Electronic Arts (including Ed Logg) Atari was in desperate need of a hit. It found it in the form of this entertaining lightgun blaster by Robert Weatherby, which actually benefitted from the cheesy, digitised visuals. In fact it was so popular that a sequel, *Area 51: Site 4* was released in 1998, while Midway Games made its own spiritual successor starring David Duchovny in 2001 after buying Atari Games.





SAN FRANCISCO RUSH: EXTREME RACING 1998

ARCADE, N64, PLAYSTATION

Atari's game makes great use of its famous location, featuring spectacular jumps and all manner of shortcuts as you tear through its three densely designed tracks. The four available cars cater for different skill levels while the sheer amount of clever secrets will make your head spin. Several sequels followed, with the fourth game, *L.A. Rush*, appearing in 2005.

MORE ATARI GAMES GAMES

- PETER PACK RAT (1985) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- GAUNTLET II (1986) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- BLASTEROIDS (1987) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- VINDICATORS (1988) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- TOURNAMENT CYBERBALL 2072 (1989) ARCADE, LYNX
- SKULL & CROSSBONES (1989) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- BADLANDS (1989) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- THUNDERJAWS (1990) ARCADE, VARIOUS
- OFF THE WALL (1991) ARCADE
- T-MEK (1994) ARCADE
- WAYNE GRETZKY'S 3D HOCKEY (1996) ARCADE, N64
- MAXIMUM FORCE (1997) ARCADE, PLAYSTATION, SATURN
- CALIFORNIA SPEED (1998) ARCADE, N64
- SAN FRANCISCO RUSH: 2049 (1999) ARCADE, VARIOUS



BOND GAMES

LICENCE TO TRY

He's the world's most famous action hero and presumably the perfect videogame character. But is James Bond really as adaptable as he seems? Two decades on from the release of GoldenEye 007, we go behind the scenes with the writers and designers that have tried to bring Bond to life in videogames

HE'S HAD DIFFERENT FACES, DIFFERENT PERSONAS AND BEEN INVENTED AND REINVENTED ACROSS MYRIAD BOOKS AND MOVIES. But for more than 50 years, James Bond has been consistently three things: tough, exotic and authoritative. Whether trading blows with the world's wickedest villains or ordering some complex, regional delicacy, 007 is Lord and master over wherever he goes. His license to kill, combined with his superlative guile, allow Bond to accomplish his missions however he likes; owing to his cocksure attitude and innumerable sexual liaisons, he also seems to enjoy himself doing it.

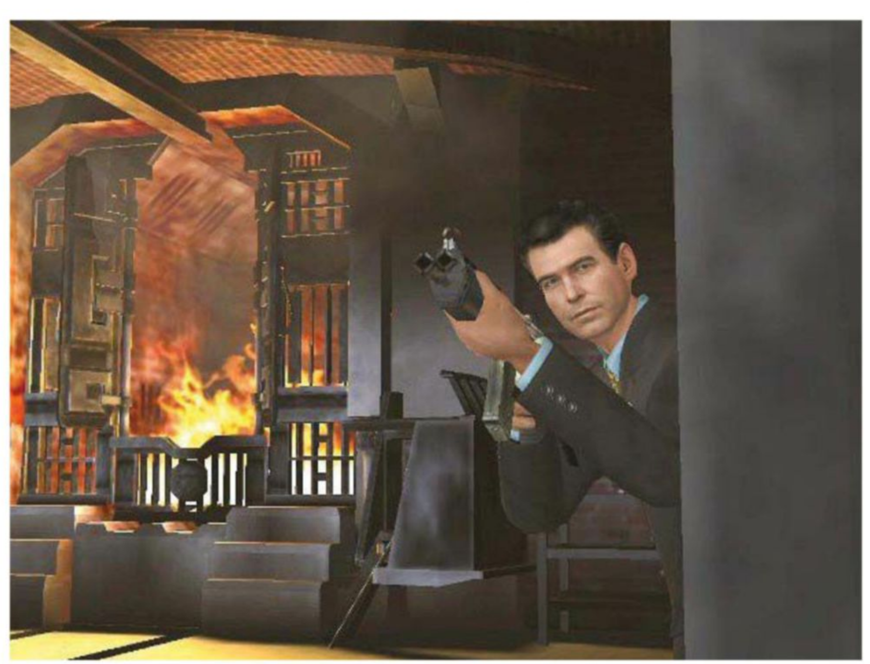
As videogame players, we also enjoy big spectacle, feeling cool and doing what we want. Games want us to feel strong, and they routinely cast us as the suave, sexually charged hero. Most importantly, they give us freedom and influence. When we walk into a new level, armed and levelled-up to the teeth, and just waiting for the goons to come out the woodwork or the new quests to start rolling in, we're instinctively aware the videogame is all about us. By that measure, James Bond and videogames seem made for one another. They're both fixated on the idea of cool, the action sequence and the sense of dominion. Bond's two military ranks – "Agent" when he's with MI6, "Commander" when he's in the Navy – encapsulate precisely the feelings of power and control videogames thrive upon. When they have such a strong, spiritual resemblance, making Bond into a videogame should be straightforward.

And yet the James Bond games, whether original stories or film tie-ins, are wildly inconsistent. For over 20 years, *GoldenEye* 007, for the N64, has been the professed benchmark for interactive double-oh-sevenry. But even Rare's opus misses out dozens of the things that make Bond *Bond*. Never in *GoldenEye* do you gamble. Never do you drink, or drive a fast car, or seduce or be seduced. As much as it typifies certain aspects of the James Bond oeuvre, *GoldenEye* also highlights why it doesn't translate so easily from film projector to game console. Talking about Bond's leap from books to motion pictures, *Dr No.* screenwriter Richard Maibaum once complained to Ian Fleming, "there's an untransferable quality in your writing." Likewise, since the development of *GoldenEye 007*, dozens of game-makers have wrestled with how exactly to create the comprehensive James Bond experience.



Goldeneye's objective-based mission structure made players feel more like a secret agent and less like they were playing a straightforward shooter

WHERE BOND IS UNFAILINGLY CAPABLE, PLAYERS MISS WHEN THEY SHOOT, SMASH UP THEIR ASTON MARTIN AND GET KILLED



The 2004 EA game *James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing* marked Pierce Brosnan's final appearance as the spy.

One of those game-makers is Bruce Feirstein. As well as penning the original *GoldenEye* film – and also writing *Tomorrow Never Dies* and co-writing *The World Is Not Enough* – Feirstein worked on EA's adaptation of *From Russia With Love* and Bizarre Creations' *007: Blood Stone*. Feirstein knows Bond back-to-front, and believes if any to-videogame adaptation is going to be successful, first-of-all it has to understand the man himself.

"Aside from the movies, I've worked on all these other, crazy Bond-related projects," Feirstein explains. "But throughout all of it, the one essential thing has been staying true to the Bond character. Bond has a whole set of unseen rules. He doesn't kill people indiscriminately. He lives in a world of 'science possibility,' not 'science-fiction.' And he has to be smart and lethal. I remember when I was consulting on these commercials for a 007 cologne and there was a sequence where Bond saved a baby in a pram. It wasn't bad, except for one thing: in 55 years, there have been no children in James Bond. Children don't exist in James Bond's world. That's just an example of one of those things you have to stay true to."

Flint Dille, a writer who's adapted *Transformers*, *Ghostbusters*, *Fantastic Four* and *Riddick* into





■ Like in most Bond games, several missions had to be added to *Tomorrow Never Dies* that were only loosely-based on events from the film.

■ One of MGM's chief concerns for 2010's *007: Blood Stone* was the accuracy of the Daniel Craig avatar and his face.

videogames, as well as Bond, with the 1999 tie-in for *Tomorrow Never Dies*, agrees. Successfully capturing the world's most-famous secret agent requires an almost forensic understanding of his persona. "Before working on Bond, I spent a long time trying to break the series down, and I ended up with this list of something like 133 different tropes that you have to have in order to properly *get* James Bond. Some of these are good for a game. For example, Bond lives like a rich guy. Q might complain when he smashes up a sports car, but Bond is not Johnny Dollar – so he has a lot of fun, expendable resources. Others are not. The standard three, big action scenes in a Bond film don't add up to much in a game so you have to invent a lot to go around them. And also, Bond isn't a straightforward shooter. It's not something you can make easily."

JAMES BOND IS A MASSIVE FRANCHISE AND IT NEEDS PROTECTING. IF YOU GET A SINGLE THING WRONG, A MOVIE LICENSE TURNS INTO A PARODY

To try and get James Bond right, developers often work closely with either EON and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), which have produced and distributed all the Bond films, or Danjaq, the holding company for all trademarks and copyrights relating to Bond on-screen. Their cooperation is supposed to ensure that, if not all, then at least the fundamental aspects of James Bond are properly serviced and translated. But managing so many rules and expectations – gratifying gamers, Bond fans and also film producers all at once – presents yet another challenge. Bond is decades-old and worth billions of dollars, meaning that every tie-in and adaptation, particularly from the perspective of the license-holders, has to carry a certain level of quality. Bond cannot be throwaway. Bond cannot be plain. Any game-maker that takes the brand on is closely monitored by the people in charge of the Bond brand, to make sure that what it produces is up to scratch.

Even on the quintessential *GoldenEye*, MGM was represented by Jane Whittaker. His job was to guarantee that Rare's game would live up to the Bond legend. "MGM was very involved in the game," Whittaker explains. "We really had to be. James Bond is a massive franchise and it needs protecting. If you get a single thing wrong, a movie license turns into a parody rather than a homage, so the brand is very carefully managed down to the finest detail. We'd picked Rare because, at that time, it was the best studio in the world, and MGM only wanted the best. I was there to make sure the brand was properly used.

"Additionally, I'd just come off development of *Alien Vs. Predator* for the Atari Jaguar, so I was able to get directly involved in *GoldenEye*'s gameplay design

and artificial intelligence. I'd also spent a lot of time at the filming of the actual James Bond movies, to get a feel of how a James Bond game should be, and I fed all that experience back to Rare. I wanted a really cinematic game. It had to be right and accurate down to every little detail."

"On the two games I worked on," continues Feirstein, "MGM read the scripts and was involved with actor approvals, but I don't recall it being quite as day-to-day as it is on the films. On the other hand, EON was just as involved with the games as with the movies. On *Blood Stone*, every level, every line of dialogue was read by Bond producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael Wilson, and David Wilson, Michael's son, was there supervising and overseeing every inch of it. He was fantastic to work with, though – an amazing collaborator. He understood games as well as the Bond movies, and really produced the whole thing. Barbara and Michael may have quibbled with a line of dialogue here or there, but it was David's show and I can't think of a single, major thing that got changed."

But film and game-makers don't always agree on their vision for James Bond. If a successful adaptation relies on details, it means even seemingly trivial things can require long and involved discussions. In *Tomorrow Never Dies*, for example, as is typical in videogames, players were able to pick up and use weapons from dead enemies. But Danjaq argued this was "un-Bond." To convince them otherwise, Flint Dille had to commit to painstaking research.

"Danjaq insisted Bond would never use someone else's gun," he says. "So, I went through all the movies and found 28 examples of where he did exactly that. And then of course *GoldenEye*, as in the game, came out, and it had Bond using other people's guns all the time! But really there's this whole series of questions about James Bond and weapons and gadgets, and how they work in relation to a game. Does he always have weapons? Does he always have gadgets? Can they be used over and over? And what happens if the player tries to use them in a place where they can't be used? It sounds trivial, but when every choice you're making is about the world of Bond and the experience of being Bond, these are very real problems."

The question of guns and gadgets relates to a much bigger issue when it comes to turning 007 into a videogame lead. Alongside a main character who is deceptively complex and a license that's carefully-policed, and practically leaden with expectations, there is one more thing that can threaten any interactive Bond adaptation: the player. Bond and the typical videogame player might aspire to the same things, like fights, looking cool and having lots of power, but they certainly don't possess the same skill levels. Where Bond is unfailingly capable, players miss when they shoot, smash up their Aston Martin and get killed. Though Bond intuitively knows where to go and what to do, players, naturally, get lost and frustrated and need to be given directions. In short, Bond is graceful. We as videogame players are not.

Bridging this gap – trying to make the player act and feel like 007, without taking away too much of their control – is perhaps the central challenge of any developer attempting a Bond game. It's something Jason VandenBerghe, lead designer on 2004's *Everything Or*

TRY ANOTHER WAY

The elements of Bond that are hardest to capture in a game

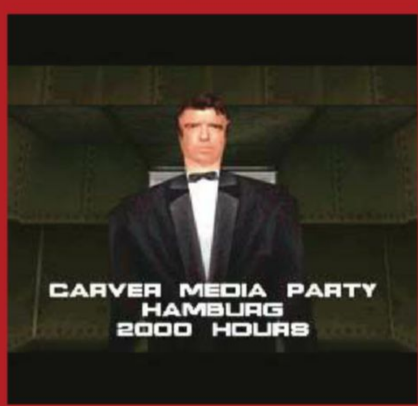
SEX

As much as his guns and cars, Bond is famous for his liaisons with beautiful women. But aside from in cutscenes, the Bond games don't really address 007's romances – a fundamental part of the character and his milieu, the idea of a James Bond seduction simulation sounds preposterous, but without something like it, any Bond game would, really, be incomplete. Maybe the dating mechanics from games like *Killer Is Dead* or even *Hatoful Boyfriend* could provide a template for future Bonds.



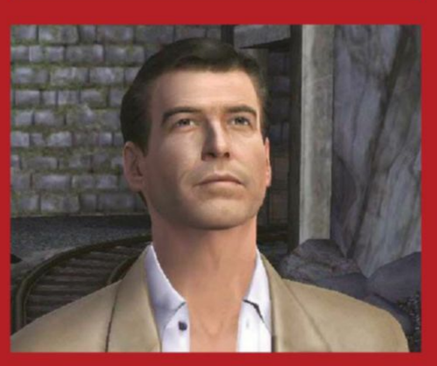
KNOW-HOW

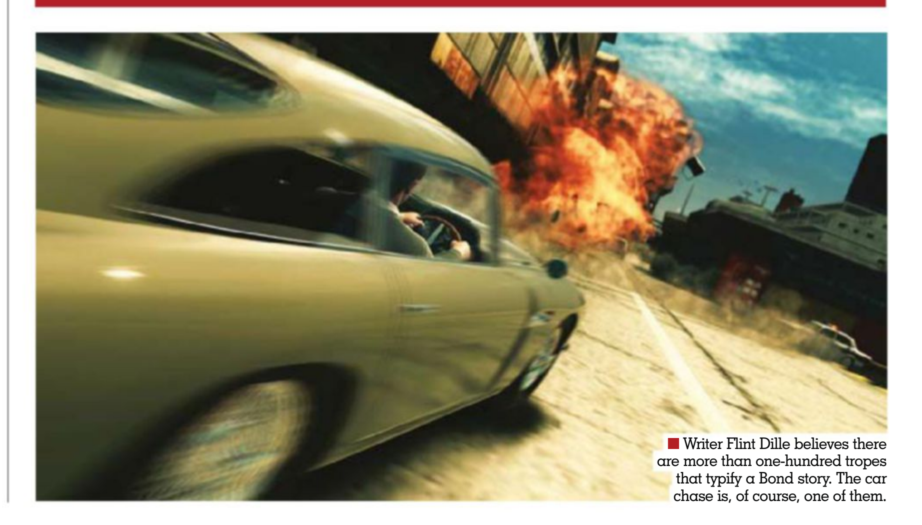
From food to international politics and even butterflies, James Bond seems to know at least something about everything. Getting players to feel like they also have access to his worldly knowledge, while they interact, is potentially difficult. Exploration and puzzle-solving are expected in games; when players are fulfilled by working things out themselves, simply giving or telegraphing information for them would be antithetical. And how would it be framed? Some kind of dialogue selection tree? A mini-game where you have to select the right wine to match the right fish? This is another aspect of Bond that's both fundamental and seems laughably unfit for action videogames.



RELAXING

Some of Bond's finest moments are when he's doing basically nothing. He's such a charismatic character, in amongst such beautiful and exotic locations, that we enjoy simply being with him. But Bond games so far have been all about shooting and killing. Driving, drinking and generally luxuriating in the world of James Bond don't seem to enter the equation, perhaps because it's assumed that all videogame players really desire is brash spectacle. Maybe a different type of Bond game, something based more on investigating and talking, such as *LA Noire*, could capture this other side of 007.





Writer Flint Dille believes there are more than one-hundred tropes that typify a Bond story. The car chase is, of course, one of them.

■ Trying to capture the quieter, less violent aspects of the Bond universe has proved an ongoing challenge for game-makers.

Nothing, released by EA, gave special attention. Along with possessing the cosmetic hallmarks of James Bond and the MGM stamp of quality, he tried to create a 007 who in the hands of players performed as consummately as he did on the big screen.

"[James] Bond's essential character trait has always been his sheer competence," VandenBerghe explains. "In the films and the books, that translates to him doing amazing things that you don't see coming. But in games, we need the player to do those things, and to do them well. It's an obvious problem, but that doesn't mean it's easy to overcome. There is a profound tension between the need to succeed at amazing things – because that's what Bond does – and the need to be able to fail at them – because it's a videogame.

"Simply putting the camera into third-person helped enormously: if the character looks and moves like a confident secret agent, that carries you a huge distance towards your goal, so for EON there was a lot of work that went into finding good running, walking, crouching and shooting animations. The other thing about Bond, he doesn't worry so much about missing his shots or losing the fights he's in. He's a master of the basics already and thinks more about the tactics, and I wanted the player thinking that way as well. So that's why we went with a lock-on shooting system instead of an aiming one. I didn't want the player to spend much of the game missing. I wanted them thinking about the tactical situation, and letting Bond take care of putting the bullets in the bad guys."

WHEN THEY HAVE SUCH A STRONG, SPIRITUAL ALIKENESS, MAKING BOND INTO A VIDEOGAME SHOULD BE STRAIGHTFORWARD

Bruce Feirstein has also developed ways of making players feel like James Bond. Aside from core shooting and fighting mechanics, properly engineering a game's story can lend it the appropriate Bond atmosphere. "In the films, Bond usually goes on a journey and suffers setbacks and reversals until he finally confronts the big villain. In games, the hero often does the same thing, level by level. Bond is typically captured at some point and has to break out of somewhere; the same kind of thing happens in many, many videogames. So overall, writing these things doesn't have to be all that different."

"In fact, one of the things I like about working on the games is you can just write and make a lot of the Bond stuff on the fly, and the red tape you encounter on movies isn't there. In the original draft of *Blood Stone*, the opening sequence took place during a party on a yacht in Hong Kong. Bond was supposed to parachute in – wearing a tuxedo, of course – and save the day, but it turned out there was some problem with Hong Kong, because images of the city's skyline were copyrighted.

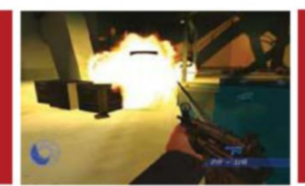




> A GAMING EVOLUTION Shaken But Not Stirred > 007 Legends



The first ever Bond game, *Shaken But Not Stirred* was a text adventure for the Spectrum, which tried to recreate Ian Fleming's distinctive prose style.



007 Legends was the most recent Bond game and also one of the worst. Its failure leaves the future of James Bond in videogames highly ambiguous.



BOND BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

MGM's secret Bond project that was sadly left abandoned

The 1999 *Tomorrow Never Dies* tie-in game started life as something very different indeed. Originally intended as a standalone, original Bond story, it was only later repackaged into a film adaptation.

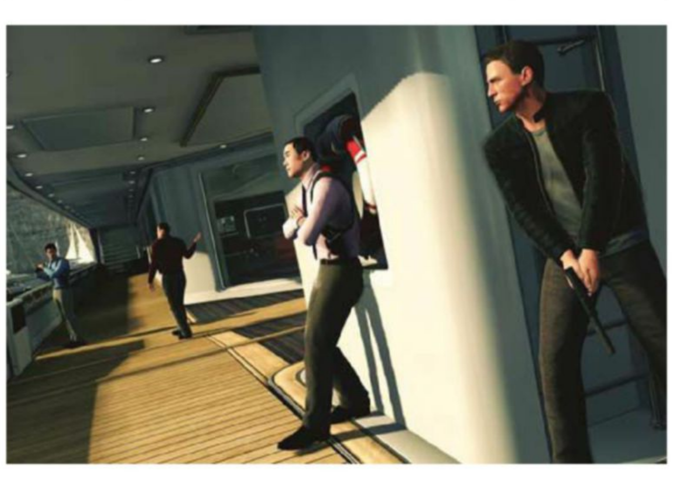
"For about ten minutes, MGM had its own, internal videogame company," explains writer and designer Flint Dille, "and it wanted to make a Bond game. The idea originally was a kind of composite. Our character was a combination of Connery, Moore and everyone else and we were just picking bits from all the movies – we even had a slow-dancing simulation in there. But then *GoldenEye* became a big hit on the N64 and *Tomorrow Never Dies* came out in the cinema, and that meant our whole project was changed."











So I came up with an opening sequence in Greece, with a chase to the Parthenon. It took all of about 30 seconds, and everyone agreed to do it and I went off and wrote it. Now, to make that kind of a change in a movie would have taken weeks, and dozens of approvals, and all sorts of questions about logistics, budgets, film crews, tax subsidies, government approvals and so on. But working on a game, you just do it. And coming up with these kinds of things, these spectacular sequences, that's the fun part of Bond."

Like George Lazenby and Diana Rigg at the end of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, in some ways, Bond and videogames seem like the ideal couple. Since Ian Fleming's first novel, Bond has been defined by his power, his audacity and the richness and ostentatiousness of the world around him. In extraordinary places, defeating larger-than-life foes, he calmly and casually performs impossible feats; the videogame player, likewise, travels to fantasy lands and dispatches untold numbers of enemies, and makes it look like nothing. From space shuttles built inside volcanoes to contrived torture devices and absurd gadgets, throughout the James Bond series imagination reigns. Games too are reputed for their wackiness, and perhaps more than any other medium permit their creators to bring vividly to life whatever they can dream up. By delineating and fleshing out its peculiarities, and working with their form rather than against it, game-makers have variously managed to capture the world of James Bond.

On the contrary, major elements of the novels, the films and the character remain untranslated. No Bond game communicates, via interactions and mechanics, Bond's preternatural ability to select the best food and drink. No movie tie-in bothers with the sumptuous, sometimes beautiful scenes of Bond simply checking into this hotel, or driving along the coast. Especially since *007 Legends*, the disastrous 2012 shooter released by Eurocom, the future of Bond games, and their fidelity to the subject, is in doubt. Like Lazenby and Rigg, as much as they look great together, James Bond and videogames may be doomed.

"It's totally possible to do these more intimate, smaller Bond moments," concludes Flint Dille. "If you wanted, you could figure out the mini-game for how Bond gambles, or for his seduction technique. But James Bond games existed in an economic niche that frankly doesn't exist any more. Today you have big franchises and no kind of middle games, and Bond games were always middle games. To be honest, it's a deceptively difficult franchise to work on. Bond is very complicated."



ON PICKING RARE FOR GOLDENEYE

"We sat down with Nintendo and looked at the cream of the world's development studios. There was a lot of discussion and a hit list of target studios. The reality was that at that time Rare stood head and shoulders above them all both in technology and vision. I think history has proved that to be a good decision – well actually a fabulous decision. I think we got one of the best games the world has ever seen to this day, from the top studio talent of the day. I had admired Tim Stamper and his team for many, many years before *GoldenEye*. His "Ultimate Play The Game" titles stood head and shoulders above everyone else in terms of gameplay. Those guys know all about what it is to make a game fun. They also had brilliant technical designers."



INTERVIEW

JANE WHITTAKER

For over 30 years he's been playing a major role in the development of some of the most innovative and successful gaming franchises, but even so you may never have heard his name. **games™** sits down to learn the hidden story of this gaming luminary

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Midwinter
[1989]
Programmer



Dark Seed
[1992]
Coder, designer



Alien Vs Predator
[1994]
Lead programmer

YOU'VE BEEN INVOLVED in game development for a very long time, and yet many people won't know your name. Why is that?

That was deliberate. As a Siamese twin, a conjoined twin, I actually had contracts that my legal people came up with for all the companies that I worked with to not try to publicise me because I wasn't comfortable as a conjoined twin, so that's why that happened. But now with doing stuff with Keystone that's benefitting kids, I felt it was time to come out of the shadows. I've been around for a very, very long time.

How did you actually get started in the industry?

I started in 1982 as a games developer. I did it from my hospital bed during all of the surgeries I had. I taught myself to code. I did 15-20 Spectrum games, Commodore 64 games, Amstrad games. *The Flying Shark* arcade conversion was one of the big sellers. I did a *Rainbow Island* conversion, *Magnatron*… lots of sellers at the time. By the time I was 15 I had done over 150,000 units. By the time I was 16 I had done over one million units, so I realised I had the possibility of a career here. One day my Dad walked into my room and said 'You're earning three times in a year what I do. Have you ever thought that you might want to leave school and do this?'

What was your first publishing deal?

I was originally published, which I think is quite interesting, by "Wild" Bill Stealey and Sid Meier. I was 15 and Sid and Bill came to talk to me about publishing. They picked up my titles, which went through their UK arm originally called Rainbird and then Firebird, and then they just renamed the whole thing as MicroProse locally.

What happened after that?

When I was 15 I partnered with Mike Singleton and Mike's regarded as the Godfather of home computing, so I couldn't have had a better mentor when I left school. Mike Singleton invented the open world game with a game called *Lords Of Midnight* and he taught me how to do open world design. This is also the guy who was the inventor of texture-mapping too. He's had a huge, huge benefit to the industry. Mike and I collaborated with a series of titles called *Midwinter 1*, *2* and *3*. We did, I think, 20 million units or something ridiculous like that.

I WAS THE YOUNGEST VICE PRESIDENT IN SILICON VALLEY WHEN I WAS AT ATARI AT 19

How did *Midwinter* come about?

We actually designed the idea for *Midwinter* in a Chinese restaurant in Liverpool. Mike was in Liverpool and I saw him with Bill Stealey and Sid Meier sat in there too, talking about a project we could publish. We had this idea for a big battles game, so what we ended up doing was literally grabbing all of the condiments and the knives and the forks and Mike and I started tabletop gaming

over each other in the middle of the restaurant. That's how the whole ethos of the Midwinter series started. We had this poor guy in the Chinese restaurant who wanted to throw us out because it was closing time. We had to ply him with some more cash and ask him for some more forks, because we just wanted to tabletop battle. That started the Midwinter franchise and it also got me interested in artificial intelligence, which I've pursued right through my career.

You then got involved with Atari. Can you explain how that happened?

As I was due to leave school at 16 I was approached by Sam Tramiel who was the president of Atari. Sam and Jack [Tramiel] came to me as I was living in a council house in Hull and they literally walked to my house and talked to my parents and asked if I would be willing to join Atari when I left school. The week of my leaving school, my last day was a Friday and by the Monday I had emigrated to San Francisco, at 16! Sam and Jack really took me under their wing, so again I had the best tutors at the best time. Because I was there without my family they treated me as family, so I was well looked after. To this day I'm close friends with the entire family. I spent years at Atari. I was the youngest vice president in Silicon Valley when I was at Atari at 19.

You're best known work there was probably *Alien Vs Predator*, right?

The big project at Atari was that I led the design and development for *Alien Vs Predator* for the Atari Jaguar, which of course was Atari's biggest title of the Nineties. If you look at the credits for that you'll find me listed there as Andrew Whittaker as the lead programmer and designer of that game. That's where I cut my teeth on first-person shooters and now I have come full-circle with first-person shooters with *Rogue Islands*.

Were you a fan at all of the *Alien* or *Predator* franchises before you began working on *Alien Vs Predator*?

Yes, absolutely. Being a fan of both movies was the reason that I agreed to take on the franchise. I was lucky to know both movies quite well so I felt I was able to do justice to both franchises. That said, hundreds of hours later and many hundreds of viewings of the movies, discussion with Ridley Scott, HR Giger and others, I found myself something of an expert on both franchises as we simply had to be to do a good job.

As it was, I soaked up the opportunity to work with the movie guys and Giger to really know the *Alien* and *Predator* universe inside out. So, actually I started as a fan and became a much bigger fan afterwards.

You also got to work with Giger on *Dark Seed*. What was that like?

Giger was an amazing man to work with, eccentric and kind in equal measure. The word 'genius' is often overused but this guy actually was a genius and had an incredible imagination. An imagination in many ways that was totally unique. He had a way of drawing you into his worlds that had you totally convinced these were real living environments and characters.

And then you moved to MGM?

At that point I had done *Alien Vs Predator*, I had done *Dark Seed* with Giger, I had gotten involved with [20th Century] Fox and Ridley Scott because of that *Alien* connection. And when the Atari guys announced that they would retire and the Tramiels sold the rights to Hasbro, I was invited to join MGM movie studios because I had worked with the movie people on movie titles and had success with it. I joined as development director with MGM Interactive. That meant I got to lead the overall look and feel and vision of *GoldenEye* on N64, again another milestone.

WE HAD A COUPLE OF WEEKS HERE WHERE WE HAD THE MURDER SQUAD WITH US AT THE OFFICE EVERY WEEK

After MGM Interactive came EA. What did you do there?

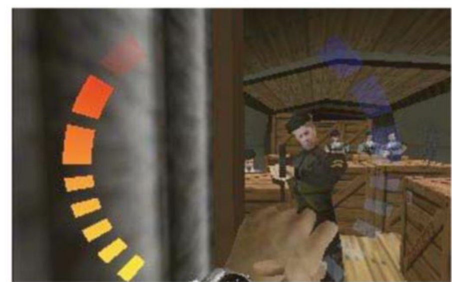
I was involved in *The Sims*, because of my AI. I was executive in charge of production at Bullfrog after Peter Molyneux left to set up Lionhead. I moved back to the UK for that and to lead the Populous franchise and the Theme Park franchise and lots of other franchises. I spent a year then at Bullfrog before returning to EA in the USA, after we had got the studio sorted post-Peter.

Was the atmosphere difficult stepping into Peter Molyneux's shoes at Bullfrog?

I joined Bullfrog just as Peter left as Executive In Charge of Production and actually the studio was incredibly welcoming. They had worked hard to build some of the finest talent in the world. Sometimes talented people can be prickly and protective, but not these guys. Within a couple of days I was part of the family, spending as much time with the team out of work as I did in work. It really was a family of people with a studio atmosphere I had never seen before or since. So there was definitely no difficulty at all.



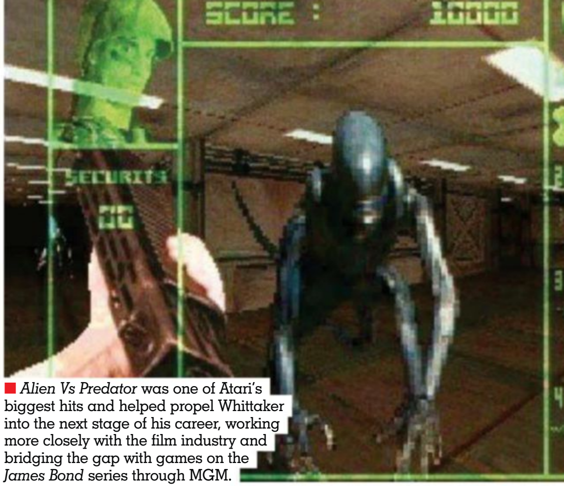
■ *Rogue Islands* is a gorgeous looking first-person RPG with voxel graphics. It has tons of deformation and exploration of the environment as well as rogue-like features like permadeath.





■ Whittaker got his professional break working under MicroProse with Bill Stealey and Sid Meier and collaborated with Mike Singleton in the making of the Midwinter series before joining Atari.





■ *Alien Vs Predator* was one of Atari's biggest hits and helped propel Whittaker into the next stage of his career, working more closely with the film industry and bridging the gap with games on the *James Bond* series through MGM.



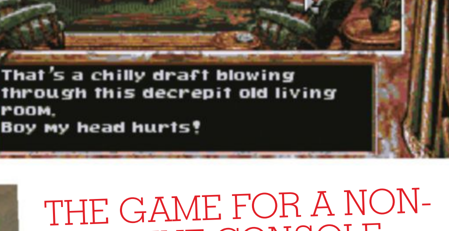


■ *Homicide Detective* has benefitted from the contribution of police officers and detectives from the UK and USA in helping to make the crimes as authentic as possible. With its open-world design, it's a hugely ambitious project.





■ Whittaker developed a reputation as a bit of a studio fixer, helping to get teams back on track creatively and financially, which is why he was trusted to step into Bullfrog and help other studios throughout EA.





THE GAME FOR A NON-EXISTENT CONSOLE

" ■■■ I did a major open world RPG called *Power Crystal* for the EA founders when they set up 3DO. Ironically the game was finished and got 100 percent reviews in Edge and stuff like that, but then they decided to cancel the console because Sony did a deal to release a new version of PlayStation instead. I have the rare distinction of having a really very highly reviewed game that everybody loved without having a console to put it on anymore, so that was a bit different. But that gave me a good RPG background. People have called it the first *Skyrim*, because it was open world with quests and stuff. So that was fun. "

What was your next move after that?
After many years ay EA I was asked to be a board adviser at Microsoft. I worked with Bill [Gates] and the senior board of Microsoft on various big titles, *Halo* and such. I got involved there for many, many years before Keystone as a senior, board-level advisor. I was also asked to help launch *Microsoft Flight Simulator* on to Steam.

How did you come to work with Keystone?
Keystone was founded last year. The Serious Fun children's charity was originally set up by Paul Newman and is now organised by people such as Danny DeVito, Tom Hanks and Harrison Ford and they have a UK branch too, called Over The Wall. They came up with the idea of founding a publishing and development business. The idea being that the publishing and development is to run just like any other publishing or development company. It's not a charity, but the idea was that instead of dividends and profit share going to directors those are going to the kids. We have 11 third-party titles signed for publishing, we have four internal titles, and we have teams in Singapore, Michigan and London. We have about 25 internal devs between those three groups.

So the charity element of Keystone was really important to you?
Most of my royalties in my career have gone to children's charities. My *Flight Simulator* royalties support a girl called Rosie Davies who was born with no lower spine at all. She's one of only three people in the world [with that condition]. She's only ten, the poor little girl. So, my *Flight Simulator* royalties have always supported Rosie for surgeries and holidays and anything the family needs, electric wheelchairs, etc. And of course I was that kid; I was a Siamese twin conjoined in a hospital bed. Keystone felt I had the empathy and understanding for the world of disabled children as well.

What games do you have coming up?
One of the internal titles is *Homicide Detective* and that's currently got 23 actors involved. We've got Warwick Davies, Kenneth Branagh, James Callis from *Battlestar Galactica*. It's a full, open-world 3D game. The way to think of it is like *Skyrim* with criminal investigations. The crimes were created by actual, real murder squad detectives both in the UK and the USA. We had a couple of weeks here where we had the murder squad with us at the office every week. We were actually role-playing being murdered; it was bizarre. We had developers laying on the floor at various angles and police officers telling us where the knife wound would be.

And *Rogue Islands* people can play now. What can you tell us about that?
Rogue Islands was originally developed by Kiaran Ritchie who's the lead technical animator at BioWare. You look at it and you'll think it looks like *Minecraft*, but the gameplay's hugely different. The gameplay is a mix of first-person-shooter and RPG. Technically, which is interesting, it's got five times the level of detail of *Minecraft*.
The islands level according to you too, not just the monsters. It monitors how well you're playing, and we adjust the topography as well, so if you're really good at this game you might find yourself on an island with really complex mountain chains and dangerous routes, but if you're still struggling you'll find them easier to navigate. In terms of numbers, we worked it out, it's 120 million combinations of island. No two people are ever going to get the same game.

The core team behind this Xbox 360 launch classic were responsible for EA's 2002 release *Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault*

GAME CHANGERS

CALL OF DUTY 2

Released: Infinity Ward **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** 22 November 2005 **System:** Xbox 360

Ushering in the era of HD gaming and laying the foundation for Call Of Duty's global dominance, this Infinity Ward gem re-established our fascination with shooters cast out across the battlefields of World War II.

SOMEWHERE ON THE road to commanding the attention of idle thumbs across the western hemisphere, Call Of Duty lost its way. It's difficult to pin down the exact date, but it could well have been when developer Infinity Ward first hung up the M1 Garand and thrust an M16 into our hands. That said, perhaps it was when Sledgehammer first fitted us into one of its exoskeleton suits, or maybe – just maybe – it was when Treyarch reset the tone of the whole series as it paired war crimes with the blaring riffs of The Rolling Stones. But really, who can say?

IT WAS AS IF INFINITY WARD HAD TRANSFORMED US INTO A CAMERA CREW, CAUGHT ON THE SETS OF *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* AND *ENEMY AT THE GATES*

Here's the thing, it wasn't always like this. Once upon a time Call Of Duty was the FPS with a heart, driven by a desire to pin its action around emotional depth and scintillating set pieces – imbued with an energy born from ambitious technical leaps and a cautious flirtation with full online functionality. In November of 2005 the Xbox 360 hit ushered in the era of HD gaming and universal online multiplayer for home console players, and *Call Of Duty 2* was right there with it – giving a new generation a glimpse into what the next decade would bring.

ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

A HINT OF WHAT WOULD COME FROM INFINITY WARD




★ *Call Of Duty 2* would give us a glimpse into what developer Infinity Ward would be capable of with multiplayer, something it expanded upon dutifully for the release of *Modern Warfare*. While the servers for *Call Of Duty 2* often struggled with terrible issues, the maps behind the connectivity problems were some of the series' best. They were impossibly tight, claustrophobic and tense affairs; giving players enough space to make use of the various weapon classes while still funnelling everybody together for enormous shootouts. The multiplayer is pure, focused around skill and understanding of the maps – not so pre-occupied with speed and scorestreaks like the modern releases. It's relatively basic, but there was something special to it.

For those that were there at the beginning, trust us on this one – the first time Call Of Duty rumbled into action was a monumental occasion. It looked like no other console release on the market – that isn't hyperbole but a certified fact; it was the one launch title that loudly, defiantly forced shooter fans to acknowledge that the original Xbox and PlayStation 2 hardware just wasn't going to cut it anymore. At its core, it was gritty and authentic in a way we hadn't experienced on this scale – it was as if Infinity Ward had transformed us into a camera crew, caught on the sets of *Saving Private Ryan* and *Enemy At The Gates*. This wasn't World War II as the history books portrayed it, but as Hollywood had. Thunderous and fast, explosive and challenging; evocative enough to give us but a taste of the horrors of war, pulling back just enough for a dangerous amount of adrenaline to course through our veins throughout its entire single-player campaign.

This was made possible by the power of the Xbox 360 and the ambition of Infinity Ward along with it. The studio's proprietary IW Engine 2.0 – a modified version of id Tech 3, first used in the original *Call Of Duty* – ensured it would be able to properly expand the scope of the series' combat, visuals and overall battlefield experience without having to make any sweeping concessions to its base vision. Overall immersion was now as important as the feel and feedback on the weapon itself; clouds of smoke would impair visibility as you tore through quaint streets and terrifying trenches, the introduction of a 'battle chatter' system would dominate the soundscape alongside the constant flitters of explosions and gunfire, while improved AI systems would prey on our general inability to avoid these plentiful distractions.

KEY FACTS

- The influence of *Band Of Brothers* on *Call Of Duty 2* is clear, and that's why Activision went right to the cast of the famed TV series as it looked for voice actors. Seven actors, including Rick Gomez and Frank John Hughes, delivered performances for the release.
- In its original release, *Call Of Duty 2* had to hard lock to 30 frames-per second if a consistent 60fps couldn't be maintained. That means that the version available on Xbox One via backwards compatibility is the best version of it, running at a slick 60fps throughout.

All of this combined excellently with the larger battlefields introduced here, less linear in their construction but still driven by an immediacy that the narrative warranted. This was war as we'd never seen it, and this game acted as a huge call to arms for the industry. Looking back at it now it can be difficult to get a sense of just how startling *Call Of Duty 2* was back in 2005 – but for players weaned on the limited offerings from the likes of *Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault* and *Battlefield 1942* it was an arresting development.

Comprised of four individual campaigns, each split into three driving stories across 27 missions, we were given a whirlwind tour of some of the most famous – and strategically important – battles World War II had to offer, and all to a generation largely uninterested with learning history the old-fashioned way. The portrayals of the Battle Of Stalingrad and Normandy Beach Landing are as evocative today as they were a decade ago, while the presentation of the North African campaign and crossing of the Rhine displayed a strong desire to surprise on Infinity Ward's part.

There's something special about *Call Of Duty 2*'s campaign because it understood – and expertly demonstrated – restraint. This wasn't some mad Bond-style power fantasy in which you tour the world putting a stop to global acts of terror and other such nonsense; it was a contained shooter that tried its best to marry the horrors of World War II with the chaos demanded by a modern first-person shooter. As Call Of Duty returns to the Western Front in 2017, Sledgehammer Games has a truly special template to refer back to and build out from; the question remains, however, of whether the considered pacing and practical storytelling of this era of Call Of Duty can work after a decade of white noise.

GAME CHANGERS

8 SPECTACULAR CALL OF DUTY MOMENTS

IT MAY HAVE JUMPED THE SHARK AT TIMES, BUT COD IS ALSO FAMOUS FOR SOME CLASSIC GAMING SCENES



PLANTING THE RUSSIAN FLAG

Treyarch would show glimpses of what it was capable of as a leading Call Of Duty developer with *World At War*, but the set-piece that still resonates today comes in the game's closing moments. Caught under heavy enemy fire with Reznov above Berlin's Reichstag, it's up to you to plant the Soviet flag on top of the building to declare victory. It's a tense, manic affair that demonstrates just how capable the series is of getting your adrenaline pumping.



DEATH OF MAKAROV

Call Of Duty may have fully jumped the shark by the time *Modern Warfare 3* hit, but its finale showed that the series could still deliver when it pulled in its focus. The Modern Warfare series came to a killer conclusion as you tear through Makarov's defences in a Juggernaut suit, hijack his helicopter before, finally, enacting revenge by riding his body through a shattering skylight. It's completely ridiculous, obviously, but it wouldn't be out of place in a summer action blockbuster.



STALINGRAD/CROSSING THE VOLGA RIVER

The original *Call Of Duty* hasn't aged brilliantly, but it does have its moments of genius. The first Russian mission of the game's campaign was a solid indication of what the Infinity Ward team would be capable of; the journey across Volga River is loud and disarming, unsettling and chaotic, an almost perfect example of scene setting in a videogame. It made you feel powerless to turn the tide, and yet, still desperate to try.



BEACH LANDING

A defining moment of the Xbox 360's launch, the Normandy Beach Landing was – quite simply – an incredible set-piece, one of the best of the generation. It puts you in the role of spectator as you witnessed the futility of war, forced to watch as your brothers in arms are mowed down by Axis forces as a desperate attempt is made to storm the D-Day landing beaches. The piercing sounds and explosive scenes are as arresting today as they were back in 2005.



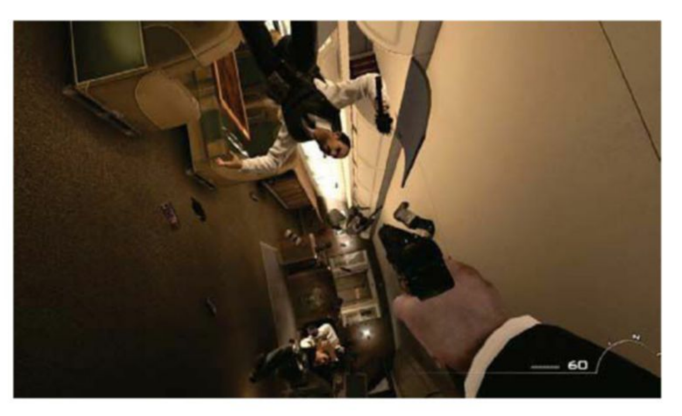






IC-130

One of the most uncomfortable scenes in modern gaming, the IC-130 section is haunting. Presented through an otherworldly grainy black-and-white monitor, this mission from the original *Modern Warfare* had you decimating white silhouettes from the safety of an overhead gunship. In an instant it made the player feel simultaneously detached and powerful, an unsettling experience that demonstrated just how impactful these games were becoming at simulating the unsettling horrors of war.



TURBULENCE

A breathtaking return to one of *Modern Warfare*'s best ideas – the Mile High Club bonus mission – *Modern Warfare 3* gave us another chance to enjoy the perils and power of gunfights in an in-flight combat zone. Tasked with protecting the Russian president from hijackers, Turbulence had a feeling of claustrophobia that's rarely been bested. It's ripped out of an action movie, providing constant twists and turns– particularly as the engines give out and the plane starts hurtling towards Earth.



THE NUKE

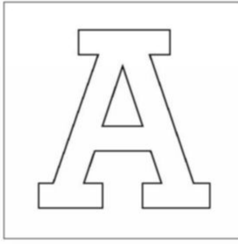
Aftermath may very well be one of the most shocking and talked about moments in gaming's history. After battling through to victory in the proceeding Shock and Awe mission, Infinity Ward throws a curve ball nobody ever saw coming. It expertly dismantles a fleeting moment of happiness by making you experience the terror of nuclear warfare. A residual sense of despair looms over the entire scene; a moment that defined the power and potential of both series and developer.

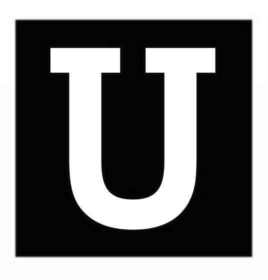


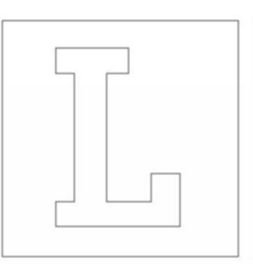
ALL GHILLIED UP

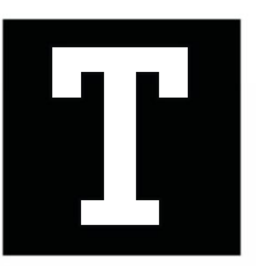
This has it all. What can we say that hasn't been said before? This mission is beat-for-beat a perfect action sequence. It whips deliriously between slow, almost silent, moments of considered movement before erupting into a breathtaking finale; it's real edge-of-the-seat action behind enemy lines, a mission that almost every FPS developer in the world would want to replicate. It's a must play, a monumental moment that established Infinity Ward as the master of the genre.











■ The SNES Classic Mini's controllers are just like the European NES originals and are fantastic for retro gaming.

■ The SNES Classic Mini is a faithful replica of the original console, although you can't use your old cartridges on the new system. Sadly, its top-loading cartridge slot and eject button is just for show.

■ The SNES Classic Mini comes with 20 16-bit era games, plus the previously unreleased *Star Fox 2*. Track one down if you can!

SNES CLASSIC MINI

MANUFACTURER: **NINTENDO** PRICE: **£69.99**

THERE ISN'T A COMPANY ON THIS PLANET THAT MAKES HARDWARE QUITE LIKE NINTENDO. This isn't some revelatory discovery on our part; Nintendo has, after all, built its reputation on driving technological advances and industry innovation through its home consoles for years now. But after more than three decades of play, the company's design expertise and impossibly strong eye for software has resulted in what is clearly one of the best videogame packages in history. The SNES Classic Mini isn't merely a celebration of a simpler, more expressive era of gaming, but a package that demonstrates the very best of what it can offer.

This beautiful little box, designed – thank the lords – to pay faithful homage to the sleeker style of European SNES is perhaps the best thing to ever emerge from Nintendo. The SNES Classic Mini packages 19 classic, if not outright legendary, 16-bit games together (oh, and *Kirby's Dream Course* is there as well as the twentieth) to give us a look at the releases that shaped the industry as it exists today. A console is only as good as the software available alongside of it, and that logic ensures that the SNES Classic Mini is virtually unrivalled in this respect. The addition and debut of the previously unreleased *Star Fox 2* is a masterstroke; this isn't a collector's item, it's a must-own for any and all that grew up blowing air into cartridges. The SNES Classic Mini isn't going to be easy to get hold of, but believe us when we tell you that it's worth every bit of the challenge.



GAMING CLOTHING



BOBSON DUGNUTT T-SHIRT

Pay your respects to the 16-bit glory days of digital baseball with this tee poking fun at the absurd naming conventions of 1995's *Fighting Baseball*. It was around this time publishers learned never to skimp on the licensing fees.
teepublic.com



HYLLIAN HERO T-SHIRT

This super cute t-shirt design by Naolito just goes to prove that Link is the very best of Nintendo's characters, particularly when they are drawn in the hyper adorable Wind Waker style.
teepublic.com



THE BOUNTY HUNTER T-SHIRT

When it comes to gaming apparel, subtle is best. There's something low-key about this rendition of Samus Aran, it makes a statement while also saying very little.
teepublic.com



The APEX 750 is a great gaming keyboard, with a hefty price tag to match.

STEELSERIES APEX M750

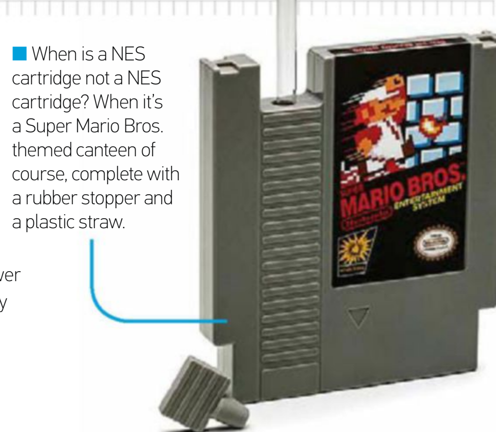
SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£149.99**

Designed for the professional circuit, the APEX 750 sees SteelSeries continuing to refine its line of esports ready equipment. While the inclusion of a pretty ridiculous lighting rig will no doubt capture the attention, it's the sleek aerospace aluminium frame and fantastic-feeling QX2 mechanical key switches that kept us sticking with the keyboard. Responsive and durable, the APEX M750 is a wonderful keyboard with a hefty entry price being the only thing truly holding it back.
SteelSeries.com

SUPER MARIO BROS. CANTEEN

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **$19.99**

Ever felt the need to conceal just "where you get your power ups" from? Well then, this *Super Mario Bros.* hip flask will probably help you, maybe. It seems terribly impractical, NES cartridges aren't the smallest items in the world, but we suppose this is probably the perfect way to have yourself a very real Mario party.
ThinkGeek.com



When is a NES cartridge not a NES cartridge? When it's a Super Mario Bros. themed canteen of course, complete with a rubber stopper and a plastic straw.



POKÉMON ROLE PLAY KIT

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **$29.99**

Ever found the idea of actually going out into the streets with your phone or Nintendo DS to be a bit of a drag? That's okay, because this role-playing Pokémon kit will get the job done for you; coming with two foam balls, a Mega Bracelet and even a Mega Grenar figure tyou can throw things at, it's the perfect companion to any Pokémon trainer.
ThinkGeek.com

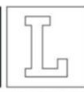
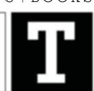


SHADOW OF WAR ONE RING

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **$19.99**

The Bright Lord and his new ring of power from *Middle-Earth: Shadow Of War* might not *technically* be cannon, but this prop replica proves that there can indeed be more than one. Built to resemble the ring from the upcoming game, along with a 24-inch chain, it's a great purchase for anybody that wants to bring a little light to the shadows of Mordor.
ThinkGeek.com

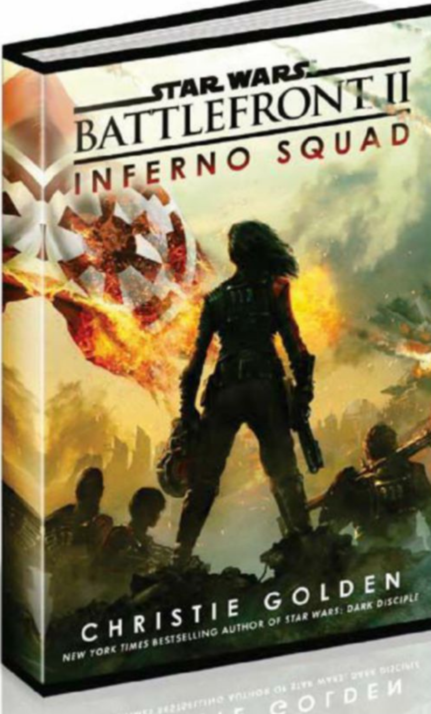




STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II: INFERNO SQUAD

PUBLISHER: **PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE**



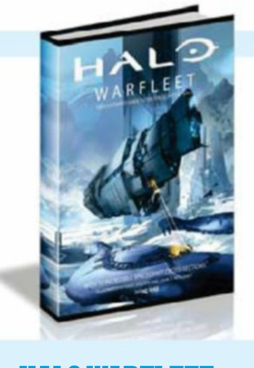

AUTHOR CHRISTIE GOLDEN IS NO STRANGER TO THE EXTENDED STAR WARS UNIVERSE, BUT IN MANY RESPECTS *INFERNO SQUAD* MAY HAVE BEEN HER BIGGEST CHALLENGE YET. Golden has been tasked with finding empathy in evil; with establishing an array of new characters in a familiar world, treading carefully through an established universe in an effort to give *Star Wars Battlefront II* and its single-player campaign some sense of authenticity. And, for the most part, *Inferno Squad* succeeds in its ambitions.

Golden manages to navigate the perils of humanising Imperial characters confidently, helping us to quickly empathise with a character that doesn't deal in the stark black and white morality of Star Wars tradition. *Inferno Squad* also has no trouble wading out of the aftermath of *Rogue One* and laying the groundwork for *Battlefront II*'s multi-decade spanning story to come this November, introducing us to the Empire's elite Special Forces squad along the way to great effect. If any criticism could be put at the feat of *Inferno Squad* it's that it fails to really capture the bombastic spirit of the Battlefront games; a far more intimate and personal tale that lacks the scale the games are so famous for evoking. Your enjoyment of this rather tight 336-page book will largely depend on your expectations coming into it, which is to say fans looking for a deeper dive into the Star Wars universe should approach with open arms – those looking for frenetic thrills should perhaps stick with their game pre-order and take the resulting single-player campaign for what it is in those moments the multiplayer severs come crashing down. But for most, *Inferno Squad* will be a fantastic opportunity to see another side to Star Wars – a wonderful and rewarding expansion of the modern universe.

penguinrandomhouse.com



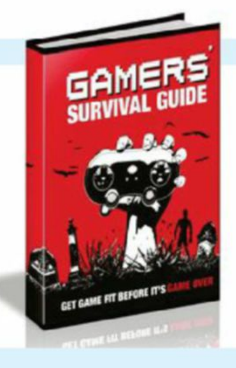
VERDICT 8/10



HALO WARFLEET

One of the best parts of any work of science fiction is the gigantic ships its creators envision and build, and *Halo Warflight* seeks to take us inside the greatest from Master Chief's universe. This authoritative illustrated guide to some of gaming's greatest space-faring fleets is a must own for any and all Halo fans.

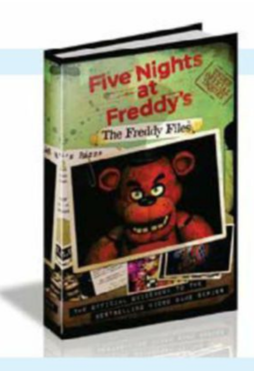
egmont.co.uk



GAMERS' SURVIVAL GUIDE

It might be October, but the *Gamers' Survival Guide* is perfect Christmas stocking fodder. It's full of tips to "gamify" (shudder) your life, complete with a ton of fitness and lifestyle tips to help improve your skills, as well as ways to improve your general gaming experience.

dk.com/uk/



THE FREDDY FILES

The first ever official guide to *Five Nights At Freddy's*, this book is designed to immerse you in its horrifying world of characters, locations and secrets. Fully authorised by Scott Cawthon, creator of the series, *The Freddy Files* is an unfiltered peek behind the scenes of one of gaming's biggest success stories.

scholastic.co.uk



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